

Third Sunday of Advent 2019 (Gaudete!)

15.12.19: Evensong

Isaiah 5: 8 to end; John 5: 31 – 40

The discipline of Advent is about finding and then holding the tension between observing a penitential season on the one hand and anticipating the joy of Christmas on the other. Because Advent is a bit of both. And even though it's Gaudete Sunday today – the Sunday when we can lighten up a bit and rejoice – the underlying trend as we get nearer and nearer to Christmas is that the tension is getting harder, or stronger.

It is getting more Christmassy every day. In fact, we have a Christmas Carol Service in the Priory every day this coming week: seven solid days of Carol Services, starting tomorrow, then one day off before Christmas Eve. There's nothing wrong with that. It's what it's all about. It's what we're here for. I wouldn't have it any other way. But if we are going to keep Advent, and

we're being pulled so hard in one direction towards Christmas, it means we have to pull equally hard in the other direction in order to hold that tension, in order to be where we need to be spiritually. To the extent that we are partying harder, we need also to be praying harder.

And what we're praying for today is that Jesus be revealed. That's John the Baptist's role. And today is John the Baptist's day. Remember the scheme of the Advent wreath: the first candle for the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and all that gang), the second candle for the prophets, the third for John the Baptist (pink for Gaudete, rejoicing, lightening up a little bit) and the fourth for the Blessed Virgin Mary. So today, the third Sunday of Advent is the pink candle, the third candle: the one for John the Baptist.

John, of course, was not the light. He came to testify to the light. Therefore be it our Advent discipline to do likewise. Be it our Advent discipline to reveal Jesus by

testifying to him. And to so that we need to take some lessons from John himself. His *modus operandi* was 1) to go out into the wilderness and 2) to preach repentance when he got there.

So, if we are to emulate John in our concern to reveal Jesus, we might do well to ensure that we operate in the wilderness places. We need, with missional intent, to place ourselves, perhaps physically as well as in terms of spiritual commitment, where there is little growth; and where the agents of growth – aspiration, succour, nourishment – are in short supply. We need to go to the hard places.

But in a coastal community, a place that feels itself to be overlooked and left behind; in a parish that is well within the top 10% most deprived in England, with pockets of the 5% most deprived; we don't have far to go. This is a hard place. It's a hard place to grow up; it's a hard place to get a fair share of investment in education; it's a hard place to find opportunities; it's a

hard place to feel connected with mainstream society; it's a hard place to consider yourself a stakeholder in wider society; and it's a hard place to reveal the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And that's why it's so important and so exciting that we are here, charged with the sacred duty of bearing the light of Christ, of living with hearts full of hope and of proclaiming that the kingdom of God is at hand.

And then, to be like John, we have to preach a gospel of repentance – which needs a bit of unpacking, because it's too easily confused with condemnation and it's too easily preoccupied with personal peccadillos.

When we come to confession, especially in the context of public worship, we are of course concerned with our personal peccadillos, with the way in which over the last week we've perhaps failed to speak to somebody in the right tone of voice or harboured frankly lascivious thoughts, or whatever. But we ought at least equally to

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be concerned with systemic sin, with social injustice, economic inequality, industrial greed and irresponsibility; with all that sort of stuff with which we are inevitably complicit. We know what God deplores. It's as old as scripture itself. It's what Isaiah was railing against in our Old Testament lesson this evening: bloodshed, crying, selfish material acquisitiveness. This is what we confess and repent of before God on behalf of the wider society.

Proclaiming a gospel of repentance is not about condemning people for being sinners: it's about proclaiming that people need to be released from sin. Repentance is good news! Repentance is about saying people need to have their dignity upheld and their identity honoured; they need to be met with kindness and respect; and they need social justice and a fair share of public resource. That is what repentance looks like: a turning away from the way people in communities like ours have been ignored and trampled on.

And saying all these things (and living them out in our lives, Monday to Saturday) is how we pull at one side of the tension in keeping a holy Advent. But rejoice! Gaudete! We pull in the other direction as well. And as we do so we find that the two sides complement each other and blessing flows.

That's why it's entirely right, Advent or no Advent, that every day this week, Monday to Friday, there will be a school carol services here. Children and young people from our parish, living amidst those multiple indices of deprivation, will sing here and read here and play their instruments here. They will lift up their eyes and see that one of the finest examples of Christian heritage in the country is their church, in which they are stakeholders and to whose unfolding story they are contributing.

That's the discipline of Advent: repenting, anticipating and shouting Gaudete!
Amen.