

Third Sunday of Advent 2020 (13.12.2020)

Isaiah 61: 1 – 4, 8 – end; John 1: 6 - 8, 19 – 28

When we lit the third candle on the Advent wreath at the beginning of the service, we noted it was for John the Baptist. Remembering John the Baptist is a dominant theme of observing a holy Advent. Last week, when we were thinking about the prophets in general as preparing the way for Jesus, it was John the Baptist we heard about as the pre-eminent exemplar of the role of prophet. Today we remember him in a more particular way.

In all four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the good news of Jesus is related as beginning with the emergence of John as his forerunner. When Mary goes to visit John's mother Elizabeth – a story exclusive to Luke's Gospel – we're told that the child in Elizabeth's womb (and that, of course, was John) leapt for joy. And it's often said that that was the first alleluia in anticipation of Jesus' birth. It's as if John is

predestined to anticipate and prepare people for Jesus. And as such he's something like a bridge between the Old Testament of the Bible and the New Testament: the last in line, if you like, of the Old Testament prophets who actually strides across the pages of the New Testament.

References to John the Baptist are often accompanied by allusions, if not direct quotations, from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. Today's Gospel reading about the beginning of John's ministry includes the quotation of a part of Isaiah we read last Sunday: "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord'". That's Isaiah chapter 40. The passage we've read from Isaiah this morning is from chapter 61. And in Luke's Gospel, that is the passage that is cited directly by Jesus himself as disclosing a manifesto of what his earthly ministry is going to be all about: "good news for the poor . . . release to captives . . . recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free."

The Revd Matthew Pollard, Rector of Bridlington Priory

So, what John the Baptist is preparing us for is a Gospel of social action. The Christian faith is not about floating about being holy. The genius of a faith which is founded upon the belief that, in Jesus, God became incarnate, that he took human flesh and shares our humanity, is that there can be no separation of the spiritual, or the theoretical, or the doctrinal from the practicalities of everyday living. Christianity is not so much a belief system, as an integrated way of being.

I've already said this Advent - I think it was a fortnight ago - that Christianity is a worldly faith: it is world affirming and world embracing. It is as much about how we live our everyday lives, Monday to Saturday, as it is about our religious practices on a Sunday. It's as much about our political convictions, our ethical commitments, our commercial priorities as it is about worship.

What I've already spoken a great deal about this Advent, though, is ensuring we have a balanced spirituality, or healthily balanced spirituality. So let me be clear, what is absolutely crucial to the exercise of Christian discipleship is an engagement with the interior journey towards God into which we are invited and to which we are admitted by the gift that is Jesus. We must worship, we must pray, we must immerse ourselves in the scriptures and we must contemplate it all; otherwise we just become naïve political activists and social agitators.

You may have heard me speak about Alan Billings before. If you watch the edition of Look North that's broadcast from Hull, you may not be familiar with who he is. Alan Billings is the Police and Crime Commissioner for South Yorkshire. Back in the 1970s and 80s, in the days of the People's Republic of South Yorkshire, he was the deputy leader of Sheffield Council. David Blunkett was the leader. Alan Billings was a radical local vicar who came to believe that you

can't serve Christ through religious ritual. He was in too much of a hurry to change the world for that. So he gave up being a vicar and exercised his vocation through being a full time politician instead.

Writing more recently¹, with I suspect more than a little autobiographical reflection, Alan Billings has spoken of the danger of spending spiritual capital without using it regenerate spiritual income. It's like living off your savings rather than investing them and being able to get use out of the income. And we reinvest our faith by keeping on retelling the sacred story of faith and by performing religious rituals. In particular, Billings talks about the resilience of what he describes as the chaplaincy role of parish ministry and of having an open Baptism policy, of doing what John the Baptist did.

¹ Billings A, [2010] Making God Possible: the task of ordained ministry present and future, SPCK

One of my greatest concerns about the impact of the pandemic on the Priory's engagement in mission has been the disappearance of our Baptism ministry. We normally baptise 50 or 60 people a year. We haven't baptised anybody since February and we have no baptisms booked in. Month after month I used to wonder what was going on as people presented their children for baptism, but whatever was going on, the memory of faith was being kept alive, the sacred story was being retold and sacrament was being enacted – God was being made real in our midst.

So we must have public worship and prayer and Bible study. But we mustn't forget that the Christmas story we're preparing to retell is the story of God being born in the midst of filth and danger. It's the story of God being prepared to get his hands dirty for us. And if we are going to be his disciples faithfully, we must be prepared to get our hands dirty for him as well.

Amen.