

Year A Advent 2

Isaiah 11:1-10

Romans 15:4-13

Matthew 3:1-12

Preparing for abundant life.

I can't tell you how much I look forward to the second week of Advent in Year A of our three-yearly cycle of readings. Maybe I shouldn't look forward to it so much. But, it is a chance to acclaim the words of that first century version of the Grinch, John the Baptist. He said,

"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance."

No wonder there aren't any pictures of John the Baptist in our Advent calendars. And even if there had been, I wonder what the chocolate would have tasted like that hides behind a picture of a camel-hair clothed figure surviving on locusts? Maybe not a smooth sweet chocolate but something altogether more bitter?

We also need to take careful note that John the Baptist is in the wilderness. A place where we quickly realise our vulnerabilities, our insignificance, the limits of our humanity. Where we often find ourselves more able to find God, sense God, hear God, and maybe even cry out to God.

Wilderness is a powerful place to be. Stripped of all that is familiar and comfortable in our lives; our routines, our gadgets, our distractions, our false idols. It can be a place of self-discovery, of taking stock, and healing. A place where we come to terms with all the obstacles of thought and deed that we have put in our own way, or in our upbringing have learnt and unconsciously adopted;

obstacles to being fully human – those thoughts and deeds that distance us from God and one another, and dull our creativity, our ability to flourish, our open-hearted and generous nature of living in God's abundant creation.

The wilderness is a place to resolve to change how we live, to change our minds at a fundamental level about how we live, the values we hold, and to choose a new way. This is indeed repentance. This is metanoia, which may be a better, less culturally loaded word for us.

John the Baptist doesn't hold back with his descriptions of the consequences of not seeking repentance. On the Lord's threshing floor, the corn is saved but the chaff is burnt with unquenchable fire!

John really doesn't sugar-coat his message, does he? He gives an example of daily living that the people would recognise; the threshing of corn and using the husks as fuel. John is using this startling picture to describe the judgment of the Lord. But of course, judgment isn't about punishment. The primary outcome of judging something is to see it with total clarity, knowing all the facts, the full picture.

On that basis the description of the winnowing fork is actually the instrument by which Christ separates the rich goodness in each one of us from the husks, so the richness of our true selves can be seen, with no barrier or outer coating in the way.

In the wilderness we may reach the point where we are willing to let God search us and know us, and to help us strip away all that is harmful and corrupting in our lives. What will be left, but our true selves that can live in the light of Christ in ways we can hardly imagine.

It may seem incongruous that at the start of our service today we lit a candle for peace, and not long afterwards we have been assailed by this gospel reading. But when we look deeper and reflect on it,

John the Baptist is offering us a route to peace. It is one that involves committing to live fully in Christ's light, to struggle and strain to shed off all that stops us from being fully human and live the kingdom life every day. It can be uncomfortable, but the work is essential to 'repent' and change, to be prepared for the way of the Lord.

That life, at peace with ourselves and with our neighbours, is the way of the Lord.

In the 21st century Advent is hardly conducive for withdrawal for personal reflection, prayer and making a commitment to walking a new path, amidst the commercial stresses of the season. However, I hope you can find some time, in whatever your own version of the wilderness is, and prepare for the way of the Lord.

As I mentioned in my monthly letter, psalm 122 has some lovely words in the final two verses, and maybe meditating on some of those words can help us start to identify what we need to change, the things that are our personal barriers to living an abundant life in community with everyone, where our paths are straight and lead to our Lord.

'Peace be within you'

'I will seek your good'.