

**13 December 2020**  
**ADVENT 3**

The perennial challenge that the preacher faces during Advent and Christmastime is to speak a new to the familiar story we all know. We all know the story. We've all seen the Christmas pageants. Many of us have probably set up our Advent wreath and Christmas tree like we have here in the Church. Some of us may have set up the Nativity crèche with the holy family, cow, donkey, and shepherds. It's become almost too familiar. In part, that's why we have the season of Advent. These four weeks serve to prepare the way to Christmas via a bit of liturgical wilderness. The penitential season provides a time of reflection and contemplation so that we can hear the good news of Jesus' incarnation afresh and let the gospel sink more deeply into our lives.

Prophets disturb us. They are often described as agitators and rabble rousers. For many years when I was growing up there was an elderly man who stood on the corner of Russell and Bourke street calling everyone who passed by to repent, to believe in Jesus or go to hell. Even at that time people laughed or mocked him in a humorous way. Some shouting back "Go to hell yourself" He remained however undeterred. Although his message was crude and direct, I am sure he was devout and committed.

Not all prophets fall into this category as this elderly man. Like the shunning and ridiculing of this man, prophets of today experience humiliation and ridicule, like the young Swedish environmentalist and activist, Greta Thunberg and her call for action on climate change along with the millions of school age children across the globe who downed books and pencils for the day to participate in the call, then to be criticized by so called smarter and intelligent people, including a number politicians who told them to go back to school and learn something. Their message can be as confronting as that of those who advocate for the release of refugees and asylum seekers.

Prophets challenge our priorities and prejudice when they question the status quo, or those in authority, or raise issues that we would rather not think about or confront. Each year on the second and third Sundays in Advent our Gospel centre on John the Baptist as I describe as the Wildman of the desert.

John is not presented as an angelic voice from heaven, announcing the coming of the Lord. In the Gospel of Mark, he is presented rather as a hermit, an ascetic, dressed in camel's hair with a loincloth around his waist proclaiming, "Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand. Perhaps those old enough to remember, see him as a swinging hippy of the 60s. Some suggest that John was a member of one of the many radical groups of his time, expressing frustration, anger and rebellion against the ruling elites of their time. In Mark's narrative he has John engaging with the religious establishments who have their ideas about the coming messiah, but John rejects their understanding that he is that person. He is not the messiah, nor Elijah. John throws all these messianic expectations out the window. He points away from himself towards the figure of the one who is still to come. John was what we may call the advance party. His sense and purpose were not about himself. It was about Jesus, the one whose sandals he was not worthy to stand in.

When Jesus came however, they failed to recognize him, as he was not the conquering hero they hoped for, but rather gathered into his kingdom the poor, the persecuted, the disadvantaged, the alienated, the lost, the despised, the crippled and the sick. They were in fact looking for the wrong thing just as so many of today's community is looking for the

wrong God to address their anxieties and concerns. How often have we heard or perhaps even said ourselves that God appears to be absent in times of struggle, and if my needs cannot be met, then God is irrelevant or nonexistent? The view that says, preached by some Christians, that belief itself will bring prosperity and fulfillment without sacrifice and challenge is I believe not consistent with the teachings of the Prophets and Jesus himself. I am regularly amazed how politicians can claim to be people of faith but yet they can still discriminate against the disadvantaged by denying them income support or refuse to hear the real cries of the refugees and homeless. As I thought about this homily, I recall the dragging of a family of 4 from country Queensland and locked up on Christmas island for over 18 months. This despite the fact that the community in which they lived supported their stay with them.

In today's Gospel, John the Baptist speaks to an impatient crowd who are looking for a messiah. You would expect after the words he speaks that the crowd would leave, but no they stay and ask and look for more. They become confused as John points to another the one who must follow.

We are moving fast through the season of Advent. Christmas, or at least the commercial Christmas is rushing in upon us with frenzy.

As I have said on previous occasions, Advent in the church's liturgical calendar is a time for reflection and preparation for the celebration of the birth of Christ. In the early life of the Church it was also much more closely aligned with the second coming of Christ.

Advent is more than shopping or even family gatherings, although both certainly have their place in our celebrations. The observance of our Faith is much more than this. Advent is a time to remind ourselves, especially those who call themselves Christian, why we have remained silent when we should have spoken up or why we have denied hope to those for whom life is a struggle.

Christian Faith is the grounding of our humanity, care for the other and an intimate relationship and knowledge of God.

Faith is more than a deity we shape in our own image, which is precisely what the religious leaders were hoping for at the time of John the Baptist and I suggest even some Christians do today when we remain silent.

Today's gospel reminds us that the one to come will come not in our image but of God. He is the one as Luke in his account reminds us who will bring good news to the poor, the broken and the downtrodden. He will set the captive free and give sight to the blind. His message continues to challenge the power brokers and the subverters of the Common Good. The life story of Jesus is one who stands with the different, the difficult and the dissident. At first when he stands in the synagogue and reads from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah people are astounded. Some surprised, others even skeptical and cynical that such words could come from the son of an unmarried mother and from Nazareth. All goes well till he reminds the gathered assembly of those in their own midst, the widows and the lepers who need help, and declares himself as the fulfillment of the promise of Isaiah. They are threatened and challenged by his words. It is not what they wanted to hear.

As I reflected on today's readings, as we move closer to Christmas, I recalled words of the playwright David Williamson a few years ago when commenting on the state of the global community of which we are part.

"do unto others as you would have them do unto you, - was without doubt the most threatening moral maxim, the powerful, the messianic, the corrupt and the indifferent had ever been confronted with."

The Powerful always work on the rule: Do unto others what your military might allow you to do."

"The fanatics and haters of the world; Do unto others the things that would cause most grief and devastation, irrespective of the devastation done to oneself."

The corrupt; "Do unto others everything you can possibly get away with.

The self-satisfied and indifferent: Do unto others absolutely nothing'.

To live as one called to live in the footsteps of Jesus will mean we will struggle as he did to bring in the new order for our times. We will be misunderstood and chastised, ridiculed and abused for entering the world from our safe temples into the wilderness of life as did Jesus and John.

The hope of Advent is not about the future but equally about the present. It is the realization, as did the gathered congregation in the synagogue that Luke recalls, that the future is the present, and as we wait, we are called to show the unconditional love and hospitality of God with others.

Today we need a church renewed in prayer and engagement with the needs of the world. We need a clergy working with and alongside the Laos of all. We need passion, knowledge, strength, and a commitment to the unknown, known only by God.

Hope is central to the meaning of Advent. It is a time to celebrate the God given potential of each of us and to be the light that shines in the darkness. As we move closer to Christmas may we together continue to embrace the challenges, confident that God is with us. Amen.