

Sermon: Ann

The third candle we lit this morning is for John the Baptist and the reading from Luke tells us quite a lot about him, more than any of the other gospels. And what a scary person he appears to be!! He dresses in very uncomfortable clothes; he lives no-one is quite sure where; he preaches in a very charismatic way and has obviously had a great influence on the people. They rushed to hear him preach in the desert, which meant an unpleasant journey for them.

Even his preaching was not something that most people would want to hear and yet he drew the crowds to him. He insulted them calling them a 'brood of vipers' and telling them that just because they worshipped God did not mean that they had a free ticket to heaven. There was no "favourite nation" clause in the covenant with God! But he tells them that there is someone coming who will be more powerful than him. However, there is a difficult time to be lived before the New Covenant comes into being.

John told the people that they needed to repent, to turn their lives around and begin living the life which God wants for all his people. The Jews thought that they would be exempt from everything but John soon moved them out of their complacency. He must have rattled the consciences of some of them because they asked him what they should do. They were very brave to ask this as they did not know what the response would be. He told them that they must share all they had.

The tax collectors asked him also and he told them that they must only take what was right and not line their own pockets as so many of them did. The soldiers too wanted guidance and he told them to be satisfied with their wages and not use their position to gain money by threats or violence. The people were so impressed by John that they thought he was the long-expected Messiah. John soon put them right on that!

The people wanted to know what they should do. Isn't that a question which we need to ask ourselves. What should we do? How should we react?

We are now less than two weeks away from Christmas. The to-do lists are still as long as ever and the time is passing all too quickly. Have you wrapped all the presents, written all the cards? No, me neither! I had an e-mail from a friend in the week which said that;

It is hard sometimes to remember to enjoy things and live in the present without worrying about the to-do list and what is coming next!

And it is so true. We don't know when Jesus will come again but there is no point worrying about it; it is not our decision; God will make his own choice in his own time. What are we supposed to do to make sure we are ready for the coming of Jesus?

St Paul knew about hardships but he was always praising God. In the reading from his letter to the Philippians he wrote: "Let your

gentleness be known to everyone...Do not worry about anything but in everything by prayer and supplication let your requests be made known to God." I am not overly fond of St Paul at times but this passage is so beautiful and sums up so much of the teaching of Jesus and what we need to do.

Where do we find God? There is a story about a violinist playing in the Washington subway. About 1000 people passed him but very few stopped to listen and even fewer gave him anything. But he wasn't just any old busker making a living in the subway. A few days before he had been playing in the Boston Symphony Hall on his Stradivarius to hundreds of people who had paid \$100 for a seat as he was a world famous violinist. Where do we find God?

A man died and went to heaven where St Peter met him at the Pearly Gates. St Peter said, 'This is how it works. You need a hundred points to get into Heaven so you tell me all the good things that you have done and I will give you points for them.'

'OK', said the man. 'Well, I was married to the same woman for fifty years and never cheated on her.'

'That's wonderful,' said St Peter. 'That is worth three points.'

'Three points? Well I attended church all my life and supported the vicars.'

'Terrific,' said St Peter, 'that's worth a point.'

'Gosh, only one point! I also started a soup kitchen and helped the poor.'

'Fantastic that's worth another three points.'

'Three points! At this rate I'll only get into Heaven by the grace of God.'

St Peter said, 'Come on in!'

Where do others find God? Do they find him in us? John came from the Wilderness and brought a message to repent, to turn life around. As we prepare for Christmas, the coming of the baby sent

by God, let us remember that we are not alone, struggling when life is difficult.

We have been given hope when we are in the Wilderness. And time to prepare for the coming of Christ by the grace of God. Let us pray:

Wilderness is the place of Moses,
a place of no longer captive and not yet free, of letting go and learning new living.

Wilderness is the place of Elijah,
a place of silence and loneliness, of awaiting the voice of God and finding clarity

Wilderness is the place of John,
a place of repenting, of taking first steps on the path of peace.

Wilderness is the place of Jesus,
a place of preparation of getting ready for the reckless life of faith.

We thank you, God, for the wilderness. Wilderness is our place.

As we wait for the land of promise, teach us new ways of living, lead us to where we hear your word most clearly, renew us and clear out the wastelands of our lives, prepare us for life in the awareness of Christ's coming when the desert will sing and the wilderness blossom as the rose. **Amen.**