

Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent.

Isaiah 11: 1-9

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;

from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.

2 The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—

the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,

the Spirit of counsel and of might,

the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord—

3 and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.

He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,

or decide by what he hears with his ears;

4 but with righteousness he will judge the needy,

with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.

He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;

with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.

5 Righteousness will be his belt

and faithfulness the sash around his waist.

6 The wolf will live with the lamb,

the leopard will lie down with the goat,

the calf and the lion and the yearling together;

and a little child will lead them.

7 The cow will feed with the bear,

their young will lie down together,

and the lion will eat straw like the ox.

8 The infant will play near the cobra's den,

and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest.

9 They will neither harm nor destroy

on all my holy mountain,

for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord

as the waters cover the sea.

Matthew 3: 1- 12

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea 2 and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." 3 This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

"A voice of one calling in the wilderness,

'Prepare the way for the Lord,

make straight paths for him.'"

4 John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. 5 People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. 6 Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8 Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. 9 And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have

Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. 10 The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

11 "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12 His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

Every Advent John the Baptist strides out of the pages of the bible and into our churches crying out for repentance.

John the Baptist, this splendid figure, a man stepping out of the wilderness, clothed only in camel's hair tied roughly about him with a belt, a man who ate for food locusts and wild honey. A prophet unafraid to speak his mind, declaring to the crowds who came out to see him, 'you brood of vipers!'

'Who warned you' he asks them, 'to flee from the coming wrath...The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.'

I like John the Baptist, but I am not sure that I would like to share a train journey with him.

He must have been a man of some charisma, because thousands came to hear his teaching and to be baptised in the flowing waters of the river Jordan.

As your preacher today, with John the Baptist as my inspiration, I must call you to repentance. However, I suspect that although you are willing listeners, my call to repentance may not have the dramatic power and effect that John the Baptist's words had on his listeners.

Repentance is not an easy message to preach these days.

The moral authority of the Church has worn thin in recent times, and anyway, modern individualism laughs at the very idea of being told what to do by any authority figure.

And from what exactly are we meant to repent these days? As the Cole Porter song goes,

“In olden days a glimpse of stocking was looked upon as something shocking but now, heaven knows, anything goes.”

The figure of John the Baptist stands before us, a wild and defiant prophet of repentance, and perhaps we are a little embarrassed of him.

It might be acceptable for his voice to be heard in church, but we would not want to be seen with him in public, in his rough camel hair coat?

Yet Christianity calls us all to a life of repentance, and to a life of proclaiming repentance to those around us.

So, how are we to proceed?

How are we to reconcile the camel hair garment of John the Baptist with ‘a glimpse of stocking’?

The New Testament word we translate as ‘repent’ is the Greek word, ‘metanoia’, meaning to understand something differently having thought it over.

The English word repent derives in part from the Latin, *repentino* - meaning a sudden change, and in part from ‘*poenitere*’ the same source we get punishing words such as ‘penitential’ and ‘penal.’ However, Metanoia is not necessarily sudden, or about self-flagellation, or punishment for sin.

If repent means 'to regret', then it is not so at odds in meaning with metanoia, but if it means 'to self punish' it has lost gospel grace.

'Metanoia' – to think again.

Metanoia is not meant to induce guilt or punishment, it is meant produce a change in behaviour through a new way of thinking.

The expectation carried in the word 'metanoia' is that having thought it over, and thus transformed your mind, your behaviour will necessarily change.

As John the Baptist said, " Produce fruit in keeping with repentance/metanoia."

Let me give you an example, if you are a multinational corporation making huge profits and are found to have paid no tax in this country, and the resulting public condemnation induces a penitential cheque being sent to the exchequer, that's repentance.

If you are a multinational corporation who comes to realise that paying tax in nation states where you trade is the responsible and right thing to do, and is actually in your long term interest, and hence forth deal straightforwardly with the taxman, then that's metanoia.

I must say, 'think it over' sounds an eminently more reasonable proclamation than 'repent'. I confess, I cannot imagine John the Baptist inviting the crowds listening to him merely to 'think it over', but then perhaps that is because I have not imagined John the Baptist correctly. Perhaps I have allowed centuries of verbal and pictorial depictions of John the Baptist to produce in my mind a caricature of the prophet as some lunatic ranting tramp smelling of damp camel hair.

Perhaps I need to think again about John the Baptist and about repentance... to 'metanoia' repentance.

In the gospels Jesus laments that the people do not hear his own call to repentance, he says

"Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand... For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed

their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.'

Did you hear? Repentance is about turning to Christ through 'understanding' so that you can be healed.

Jesus also said, 'I have come that they may have life, and have it in abundance'. To turn to Christ, that is to follow his teachings and example, is to turn to abundant life.

Christians are to proclaim abundant life, a life worth living, a life of spiritual and physical well-being, it was never intended that Christians preach condemnation of others; we are to proclaim the gospel, the good news – we are not to judge others and proclaim bad news. Our lives are to be a sign pointing to that holy mountain of which Isaiah spoke, on which "They will neither harm nor destroy."

A young man in a 'hoody' once engaged me in conversation in the Church Yard of All Saints Loughborough; he wanted to know why I had become a Vicar.

I told him it was because I believe that life is better with Jesus, and I think people need to know and understand that. In return I asked him why he smoked cannabis - he had a roll up in his hand and I had recognised the smell. He replied gloomily that it helped him cope with life, and then he looked at me and said with a wry smile, 'Perhaps Jesus would be a better way.' 'Metanoia' had taken place, if only for a moment he had seen things differently.

Our society seriously needs to think it over, living a life based on the motto, 'me first' is destructive both to personal and to corporate happiness. Living a life based on love for neighbour and for God brings personal and corporate healing, the way of Jesus is better.

If we, the Church, understand 'repentance' as a return to disapproving of a glimpse of stocking, repentance as an unpalatable diet of locusts and wild honey, and as a life of loud moral outrage springing from hidden personal desperation, then no one will be interested.

But if we quietly abandon repentance as too pushy and anachronistic, then people will rightly ask what we stand for, and finding that we stand for anything, ignore us.

However, if we believe and proclaim that Jesus is good news for everyone, the way to abundant life, then we may, by the grace of God, be heard.

The figure of John the Baptist stands before us and asks us to think again.

Amen.