

Address: Ann

Luke opens this chapter by setting the scene so that there is no doubt about the setting. He wanted everyone to be aware of exactly when this took place. He begins with the political rulers, first the emperor Tiberius then the local rulers Pontius Pilate and Herod and then the religious leaders Caiaphas and Annas. Many people realised that all was not well in the region and all of these men mentioned were less than perfect!

It was into this time of unrest that John the Baptist appeared and spoke to the people. We don't know a great deal about John except that he dressed in a strange way and supposedly ate insects and operated from the desert. But he never aspired to the top job because he knew that he was the courier of the king and was preparing the people for someone greater.

John's work was from September AD 27 and October AD28 so not a prolonged ministry. The desert was often seen as a meeting place with God (remember Moses!) and was a quiet place without noise or distraction. There was a marked difference between John, a scruffy individual but full of courage, knowing what he had to do and Herod, a man who lived in relative luxury but bent with the wind when making decisions!

John did not endear himself to any of the rulers! He was asking people from the highest to the lowest to repent, to look at themselves inwardly and begin a new way of life. Never a good plan! Josephus, the historian wrote: He had exhorted the Jews to lead righteous lives, to practice justice towards their fellows and piety towards God, and so doing to join in baptism.... when others

too joined the crowds about him, because they were aroused to the highest degrees by his sermons, Herod became alarmed.

John must have had great charisma as people flocked to listen to him in a very unfriendly environment. Perhaps however it was appropriate as very often we find ourselves in a desert when we are troubled and feel that life is difficult. It is only by turning to God that we find the peace which passes all understanding.

To get to that point we need to look inwardly at ourselves and that is the purpose of Advent, a time not only to prepare the Christmas presents and food but to prepare our hearts for the coming of the King.

If we have someone coming to stay most people spend time making sure that everything is in order. The bed is made up, the towels are put out and the food is sorted. There may even be an extra clean! But we make sure that there will be a welcome. And that is what we need to do in ourselves. Sometimes we know what it is that we should do because it has nagged for some time but our response is often, “Yes but...”.

John’s message is of repentance, turning our lives around, accepting that it is God’s will not our own that we ought to follow. Many feel that God would never want them because they are unworthy and try to manage on their own but it is precisely because we are so imperfect that God wants us to turn to him.

There was once a monk called Ambrose who was regarded as very spiritual and was in great demand to speak and lead retreats. He was very organised and was very erudite too. But he was a bit of a loner and recluse. Then he was struck by illness and thought his ministry was over. He decided to reach out to help others who were suffering and found that he was a completely different person doing a great deal of good.

Before he died he said: I had been travelling in one direction when all of a sudden I was forced to go in another. But in the process I learned more about myself and about the goodness of other people than I had learned in all my previous years of living. God turned his life around as he will with ours if we let him in. A verse I found in preparing this:

Ring the bells that still can ring

For get your perfect offering

There is a crack in everything

That's how the light gets in.

It is from a position of weakness and need that we will find the peace of God as we open our hearts to him. So as we journey through this penitential season to the birth of that baby at Christmas, let us turn to God and let his light in.

Let us pray:

Walk softly, as you journey towards Christmas, that each step may bring you down the starlit path to the manger bed. Talk quietly as you speak of Christmas that you shall not drown out the glorious song of angels. Kneel reverently as you pause for Christmas, that you may feel again the Spirit of the Nativity rekindled in your soul. Rise eagerly, after you have trod the Christmas Path, that you may serve more fully, the one whose birth we hail. **Amen.**