

John the Baptist: Advent 2 2020

On this second Sunday of Advent we meet John the Baptist for the first time. We meet him preaching from the wilderness, we imagine a barren place, perhaps a beating sun, a place where little grows or thrives, a solitary place.

John is in the wilderness deliberately, I have a mind's eye picture of John, strangely dressed, unkempt, unusual diet of locusts and honey, but absolutely intent on his purpose. It seems being in the wilderness sharpened his sense of direction, the task ahead of him as the messenger, the last in a long line of prophets, pointing towards Jesus, the one who would come to change everything.

This isn't all about me says John, it is all about him who will come after me.

The idea of wilderness resonates with us this extraordinary year of 2020. We relate better to isolation, sharpened focus and the context of emptiness, travel restrictions and not seeing those we love for a long time.

I wonder, what has your wilderness looked like this year? I guess it will vary.

Imagine if you will, going camping in a remote place. A place where it is really dark at night, where you are close to nature, a place where there is space. We might call it a wilderness of sorts. How we experience that place really depends on the resources we have, whether we have a warm sleeping bag, a gas stove, a decent tent, good shoes. It may also depend on whether we have company, resilience, good health and whether we know we have a home to return to.

I think this is also true when we think about the wilderness of lockdown and our extraordinary times this year.

For some, who have a steady income, a warm home, security for the future, access to the internet, they have almost been spectators to much of the hardship around them. Some people naturally enjoy their own company, and may even have found this a precious time of being at home. Some have reassessed, there are many choosing to move out of cities into rural areas for a better quality of life. Others have decided to retire, or to move, or to change direction with work. It hasn't been all bad and we have learnt what really matters.

But others have been in the thick of it and it has been costly. Some have had to make difficult decisions and found that it is impossible to do the right thing. Those at the heart of healthcare have found their lives turned upside down as they have witnessed death and devastating illness and some have subsequently been ill themselves, physically and mentally. These people are emblems of hope to others. But many are bereaved, businesses have collapsed, poverty is exposed, thousands of jobs have been lost.

Indeed, it has been a wilderness place, and so much worse if you haven't had the resources to cope with it.

John, the messenger of God, also spoke into brutal times. He urges people to turn their lives around, and many were forced to look hard at who they were because of John. John did not water down his words, he says, let the mountains be made low, the valleys lifted up, the uneven ground made level, make the road straight so that we have a clear view towards God who comes in Jesus. Jesus who is total love, compassion, mercy and justice.

I wonder what that means for each of us this Advent in 2020.

These mountains and valleys can be personal, often they get in the way of our being able to see clearly where we are going, and we don't know whether we can approach God at all. They may be mountains of sadness, worry, grief, relationship difficulties. This year has been particularly stressful and we can't minimise that or pretend that illness, loneliness, loss of economic security has been anything else for so many. There is a challenge in all of this. How will we remove the obstacles for other people so that they have a clear sight line to the fullness of life too?

What are these obstacles that get in the way? I think that they are anything that blocks, or consumes or makes life so difficult that it is impossible to see beyond them. Many of you will, like me, have seen the devastating report on the BBC News a few nights ago highlighting the plight of those in desperate poverty in Burnley and the role of the church ministers in improving people's lives. Record numbers of people are seeking help from foodbanks and other charities. Record numbers have lost their jobs and wonder when or if they will work again.

I wonder how John the Baptist might have responded to our society today?

What can we do to help one another? What can we do just to make a bit of difference to someone else? What is God's new plan for us personally and together as church communities?

John appears on the scene and points the way, then and perhaps for us now too. He points us to the one who comes who loves us beyond measure, who greets us with mercy and compassion, who wants the best for each one of us, who continually challenges us to consider what God might be saying to us.

How will we help to make the road straight and bring a message of good news to everyone? We might remember in Luke's' gospel John urges the people to share what they have and take no more than is owed to them.¹

John the Baptist, the messenger of God, points us in joyful expectation towards Jesus. How will we respond to his challenge this Advent and make things ready for the one who comes to dwell amongst us? We celebrate the good news of love, active love, that both comforts and challenges. Despite everything, we believe in Jesus who can and does break through wilderness times to speak joy to our world once again.

¹ Luke 3: 10 - 14

