

A Sermon for the Third Sunday of Advent Year B

By the Rev. Jackie Bullen

Isaiah 61.1-4,8-11; 1 Thessalonians 5.16-24 and John 1.6-8,19-28

John the Baptist

On the third Sunday of Advent, John the Baptist is our central figure. During the four Sundays in Advent, we start with the patriarchs, followed by the prophets, John the Baptist, and Mary, the Mother of God on the fourth Sunday of Advent.

Together with these figures, we journey towards Christmas; towards the celebration of God coming to the world in the person of Jesus Christ.

Advent is a time of preparing ourselves once more for Christmas, but also reflecting on how ready we are to receive God in our lives, and indeed, how ready the world is to bring in the Kingdom of God.

Thinking about this in the light of the way that we are currently living and our readings today, it made me wonder if in some ways we're actually journeying in the wrong direction, instead of towards receiving God in our midst?

And if so, what would it take for me, for us, to reorient ourselves and, metaphorically, to start following the star towards Bethlehem?

I am sure that I am not the only person who is surprised, if not worried, about the current situation regarding the corona virus and people's reactions to it.

Some people seem to be committed to following the rules one day, trying to make things as safe as possible, and the next day those very same people seem to think it really is all over the top and we should all just do as we please.

Why do people seem to change their minds so completely, and so suddenly?

Why do people seem to be so easily swayed from their once strongly held convictions?

One reason that is suggested, is that we are by nature impatient and that the availability of instant communication and gratification, which is so much part of our daily life, has made us even more impatient.

If we can't have what we want when we want it then we start looking for other things. Whatever we want, if it's not from Waitrose or John Lewis, we can get it through Amazon Prime within 24 hours. No need to plan ahead, no need wait. And so it is with communication. Whatever I'd like to say to whomever, we can do instantly through a phone call, email, text or Whatsapp.

How different it was in the time of Isaiah and John the Baptist. News travelled much slower. The world was a very different place.

Despite the fact that most of us live longer, healthier and, in many ways, have a much easier and better life, maybe there is something that has been lost in our race to speed things up. And that something is maybe our ability to wait.

There is also a great deal of talk of independence and how wonderful it is if people can be independent. Maybe in our determination to hold the notion of independence in such high esteem we are becoming fearful of being dependent on one another.

How does this affect our understanding that we are dependent on one another and on God and our ability to be thankful for this?

In our determination to be independent we can easily lose something of the defining characteristic of what it means to be human, that is, living in relationship.

People have gone before us, others will come after us, and many walk alongside us. And, indeed, we believe that God does all of this at the same time.

Our dependence on each other and on God is not a burden, but in fact one of our greatest gifts.

If we would be more aware of this, could this give us more of a sense of peace?

If we are more grounded in our identity given in relationship, would we feel less need to react instantly to what happens around us, more able to take time to consider things carefully and come to more reasoned responses?

These thoughts, bring us to the second question: how can we reorient ourselves towards receiving God in our lives?

As I have already suggested, a large part of it is being patient and learning to see that God is already among us: what we are waiting for is already a reality.

But what does that mean in practice?

To suggest an answer to that question, I'd like to use the other article I read as an illustration. It speaks about the attitude of the Church of England towards numerical growth and it suggests two possibilities: panic or denial.

Panic: it's not a good response. It means we look for the quick response, often not thought through properly.

Denial: we can convince ourselves that statistics don't mean that much, that the Church is not about numerical growth, but about spiritual depth and presence in a community, ultimately trusting that the Church is the body of Christ, and that somehow 'God will sort it out'. This can lead to complacency if we're not careful.

In the light of today's readings, maybe one of the most important lessons to take away is that the Christian life is more about being than it is about doing: doing will follow the being if we commit ourselves to living a life of integrity.

We read of the prophet Isaiah saying: 'the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour'.

And we read about John the Baptist in those famous words in John's Gospel that he 'came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.'

Our task, our doing, so to speak, is to bear witness. To testify.

That is what we are doing in this act of worship, but that is also what we are doing every moment of our lives: we bear witness of who we are, and as we do that, we bear witness of our Creator.

As we use our gifts, we acknowledge the Giver: it is not about us, it is about the one who stands among us, whom many do not know, again in the words of John's Gospel. And then comes that realisation, that it is not about us, brings all these thoughts together: we are here to live our lives, not for ourselves, but as witnesses to God's saving love.

It is not about us, but our relationship with others, and through that, our witness to Christ.

Next week it will be the fourth Sunday of Advent and shortly afterwards Christmas Eve, when we celebrate how God showed his love for us by wanting to live among us.

I wonder, how do we show our love for him towards another? How do we reflect that love in our own love and kindness?

The words from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians – also set for today – give us a good starting point: 'Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.'

Rejoice, pray and give thanks: not a bad beginning to reorient ourselves towards God, to follow the star to Bethlehem.