

Advent II 2019 (Year A)

Every year when we reach the Second Sunday of Advent, I think of Brenda Wootton. Brenda was a larger than life folk singer with a wonderful voice, legendary in both Cornwall and indeed all over the world for her evocative singing of Cornish and Celtic songs. As a teenager (and I show my age here!) I heard her at the Truro Folk Club which met in The Swan Inn in Bosvigo Road – now converted into housing. I have never forgotten her Song of the Nightingale. Sweetly she sang, and then erupted into a tremendous tra-la-la when you were least expecting it!

I am always reminded of this, because today we have been somewhat lulled by the lovely vision Isaiah paints of a transformed world brought about by the Messiah: *'The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.'* This extraordinarily evocation is one which has taken on new life within our Faith. Jesus is the one who does indeed turn the world upside down. We have also heard Paul, calling people to not just live in hope, but to display it in every facet of their lives. This hope is founded on the rock of Jesus Christ.

However, our Gospel reading takes a different turn. Like the moment when Brenda shook everyone in the room with that loud call, so John the Baptist strides on to the scene, like some éminence grise! ***'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'*** Matthew's account which we heard is the most uncompromising of all the Gospel versions of John's proclamation of the Kingdom. Here is the original party-pooper! Just when people were trying to get on with their lives in the face of Roman occupation and an over-zealous religious bureaucracy, John arrives with a hair-raising message. It is all very Matthaean, complete with vivid imagery of axes at roots of trees and talk of unquenchable fire. If there is not a person in this church disquieted by the Gospel reading in some way, they must have been distracted by the trees!

Very often when we approach Advent, we do so in a way which merely reduces it as a gentle lead up to Christmas. People open the doors of the Advent calendar and all too often reduce it to an exploration of the sweets found in many such a calendar. However, what Advent represents is the annual opportunity to be reminded of the start of a liturgical journey which seeks to lead us on a journey of growing our faith grow in faith as we travel firstly through this opening season of the Church Year, and then through the richness of the other seasons and festivals of the Church. In doing so, we are drawn into the many facets of the opportunities of our Christian journey. There is real value in this time-honed and thought-provoking journeying year by year.

Advent's primary function is to powerfully offer us the call to consider just who we are in both our relationship to our Faith and indeed to the world and creation. John's initial statement, *'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near,'* reveals one of the fundamental aspects of our journey. The call to repentance is the desire to seek always to align ourselves Godward. This turning is may be represented by a moment of change in a person's life but should also be regarded as a constant journey within our individual faith. I

love the words of the 'Shaker' hymn, 'Simple Gifts,' which says, 'To turn, turn will be our delight, till by turning, turning we come 'round right.'

This journey of repentance leads us to the knowledge of the kingdom of heaven – the second part of John's call, and a running theme Matthew the Gospel writer uses throughout his Gospel.

Matthew's use of kingdom imagery is one which is perhaps better translated as the **rule** of God. Thus it is not a place or institution but a state of affairs. Jesus brings this kingdom to life through his ministry, and deepens its powerful message to humanity, and indeed to the whole of creation through his passion, death and resurrection. It is a kingdom we are all part of through faith through the knowledge of the selfless love he displays for us on the cross. We should view John's call as one to reveal the wondrous grace of this kingdom life in all that we do as the promise of even greater treasures to come.

The voters of our nation have an awesome decision to make this Thursday as they vote by placing a cross on the ballot paper. Some of you may have already done so. I have no intention of expressing an opinion about the choices on offer. Rather, it seems to me that even though voting is a powerful part of our duty as members of a democracy, we have an even greater responsibility: to reveal Jesus Christ to the world; to draw people to the fulness of life which he offers to all people without exception. We are each in our own way to mirror John's message through the way in which we live our lives.

Our society needs Jesus Christ more than ever before in its history. The Christian faith reveals an equality of love for all people; no one is beyond the limits of God's love. The terrible deeds we have heard of which seem to be increasing within society will not be answered through seeking an increasingly secularist view of the world. Secularism does not and never will have a true heart – it is a chimera, as I believe will become increasingly apparent as years go by.

Paul, writing to that tiny persecuted Christian community in Rome hit the nail upon the head in terms of our approach to the world. **Hope** is at the heart of our faith. The journey of this hope is something we are called to learn through study of the scriptures, as Paul reminds us: *Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.* Christian Hope is the knowledge that no matter who or what we are, no matter what we are experiencing from the highs to the lows, we are accompanied on every step of our journey by a love greater than we can imagine yet revealed within our humanity in the face of Jesus Christ.

The great Advent cry is to 'abound in hope.'

In revealing the grace and love shown by Jesus Christ and the knowledge of the hope it reveals, we each have the ability to bring about the transformation of the world so that it may truly be *full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.*



Isaiah 11: 1-10

A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

²The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

³His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;

⁴but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

⁵Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

⁶The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.

⁷The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,

and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

⁹They will not hurt or destroy

on all my holy mountain;

for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord

as the waters cover the sea.

¹⁰On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

Romans 15: 4-13

⁴For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. ⁵May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, ⁶so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁷Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. ⁸For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, ⁹and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,

'Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles,

and sing praises to your name';

¹⁰and again he says,

'Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people';

¹¹and again,

'Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,

and let all the peoples praise him';

¹²and again Isaiah says,

'The root of Jesse shall come,

the one who rises to rule the Gentiles;

in him the Gentiles shall hope.'

¹³May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Matthew 3: 1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ²'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'^[a] ³This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

"Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight."

⁴Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, ⁶and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁷But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruit worthy of repentance. ⁹Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ¹⁰Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

¹¹'I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹²His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'