

John the Baptist ...

... gives us a 'God-shaped' silence to inhabit

A reflection given on the Second Sunday of Advent, 4th December 2022 – by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster

Matthew 3.1-12

It's very easy to criticise, isn't it? Whether it's the performance of football players in the World Cup where we all become football managers, or the performance of prime ministers making decisions affecting the rest of us - it's very easy to point out the follies and the failings of others. But don't get me wrong, we need people to get angry about injustice and corruption and wrongdoing. We need people to hold those in power to account, whether it's delivering policy on climate change or dealing with racism and misogyny in the police force or providing proper support for people sleeping rough on the streets - we all have our own lists of things that we feel those in authority and those in power should be doing, and they need to be called to account.

And this is what the Old Testament prophets did so well, pointing out where there was a gap between the vision of a healthy society and the reality. And we see it this morning in the gospel reading, telling us about the preaching of John the Baptist. He lays into the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and Sadducees, calling them a brood of vipers, challenging their complacency, thinking that they were righteous simply because they belonged to the right nation as descendants of Abraham - these were the leaders people looked up to. And John lays bare their self-serving corruption. He's angry and he's 'alternative', living outside the mainstream, adopting an eccentric lifestyle, and that gets him noticed and it gives him an authenticity that people respect and pay attention to.

It's been suggested that the modern day equivalent of John the Baptist is Greta Thunberg: someone who's angry; focused on the failings of those in leadership with their 'blah, blah, blah' as she puts it; standing apart from the mainstream with her refusal to go to the Cop 27 summit; and coming across as a slightly eccentric, neuro-diverse figure with her own integrity. [Perhaps John the Baptist was neuro-diverse as well - there is something of the Old Testament prophet about that]. And we still need our prophets. But when all is said and done, what is John the Baptist able to offer? He can call people to repentance. He can baptise with water and wash things away. But what is he able to put in the place of the things he denounces? He looks forward to one who will baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire, but he doesn't know who that is or what that will look like. And that's often the problem with modern day prophets. They can highlight the ills of the world. They can draw our attention to the corruption and injustice that

blights so many people's lives. But what are they offering? In the end, the anger and the finger-pointing is in danger of just making us all more cynical, "Oh, that's the way the world is." We shrug our shoulders. Nothing ever really changes.

But what John holds out is the possibility of something different, this mysterious figure who will baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Sounds like a different level of possibility, something hard to quantify, something transcendent. For John, there just had to be a period of waiting, of expectant anticipation, to see what God would do. And he created space in the wilderness to do that. And perhaps we too, in this Advent season, need to recover that sense of openness, of not knowing what God has in store, but of humbly trusting that he will come to his people afresh, even if we're not sure what form Jesus Christ will take for us today.

There's a story about the evangelist Billy Graham being invited onto a TV programme, provided he didn't talk about God. Don't ask me why they invited Billy Graham onto television, not to talk about God, but apparently he agreed. And he was asked whether he had always had a gift for public speaking. And he replied, "I know I was a terrible public speaker until I was eight." And then he stopped and everyone was left wondering, well, what happened when you were eight? And of course, it was his conversion, his encounter with God. But he had agreed not to talk about God, so there was just a God-shaped silence. John the Baptist presents us with a God-shaped silence in the way he looks at the world. The Messiah is expected but not named.

So how do you frame the world and your life? How do you make yourself aware of what is not right whilst allowing space for God to do a new thing?

Advent is the season where we move from anger and disillusionment to hope-filled waiting as we allow ourselves to inhabit the God shaped silence.

Reading Text

Matthew 3:1-12

³ In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ² ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’ ³ This 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.” ’

⁴ Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, ⁶ and they were baptised by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁷ But 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? ⁸ Bear fruit worthy of repentance. ⁹ Do 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. ¹⁰ Even 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 baptise 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 baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² His 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.’