Sunday Morning Resources
Sunday 13th December 2020 – Advent 3, Year B

Lectionary Readings (depending on the kind of service you are leading, you may use one or more of the following readings – however, you must use the gospel reading, as this is what the homily is based on)

Isaiah 61.1-4, 8-end
Psalm 126 (Or Canticle: Magnificat)
1 Thessalonians 5.16-24
John 1.6-8, 19-28

Homily

Today’s homily has been written by Sarah Molyneux-Hetherington, Lay Pioneer, Table, Downham Market

All of the Gospels refer to John, some give the whole backstory with Elizabeth and Zechariah [zeh-kuh-RAl-uh], others focus on his baptism movement.

Something we don’t always talk about is the size and popularity of John’s movement. Or the fact that John’s was more popular and palatable than Jesus’; while John was strange – you can’t eat wild locusts and still be considered ‘a normal guy’ – he was perhaps a closer fit to the Jewish expectations of great prophets and indeed the Messiah.

There are a number of examples in the Gospels where John and Jesus’ movements are compared, with John’s being presented as normative i.e. John’s disciples fast while Jesus’ feast, John’s disciples had a prayer which led to the disciples asking Jesus for one, which we now know as the Lord’s Prayer.

There was a tension at the time the Gospels were being composed about the exact relationship between the two movements, was Jesus’ movement a splinter from John’s? He was baptised by John after all, and John’s was more established. Each of the Gospels tackles this question in their own way, each seeking to offer similar explanations.

This is particularly clear in John 1:8, which states: “He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.” This same message then comes from the mouth of John in 1:26-27 when he says: “Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.”

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What I think is particularly remarkable about John, as seen in this passage, is that he seems to have an assurance and inner conviction about his ministry and his role in the Kingdom. The priests and the Levites come to him asking whom he says that he is, is he the Messiah, or Elijah [uh-ly-jah] returned? Both of these are not simply identities but symbolic titles and roles, they are in effect asking him what position of power he holds. John simply responds with ‘I am not.’

John seems reticent to give himself a title, he is not seeking recognition or grasping for power, even when it is seemingly offered. Instead of a title he gives himself a job description, quoting Isaiah [ai-zay-uh]: “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’”

John seems to know himself incredibly well, he knows what he is called to do and perhaps most importantly what he is not called to do. Towards the end of this passage, John uses his time in conversation with the Levites and the Priests to signpost to Jesus, saying “the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal”. John, son of a Priest and already well-known at a young age uses his position of power to direct attention to another, to Jesus. An unknown carpenter, conceived to an unmarried woman, from Nazareth of all places. It can be easy to miss the significance of what John is doing with his platform.

I think there is a very real challenge presented by John’s story in this passage. Like Jesus, John seemed to know exactly his place in the Kingdom as shown in his response to being offered positions of power. We see Jesus doing the same throughout his ministry, but perhaps most clearly in the Temptations where a character known as the Devil offers him a range of powerful positions.

Do I have this same inner conviction of my place in God’s kingdom and ministry? [Pause, perhaps repeat the question]

The knowledge of one’s place in the world, in society and the kingdom, comes from an understanding of self and time spent in conscious contact with God through prayer. Both John and Jesus dedicate significant time in the wilderness to be with God, I don’t think this is a coincidence.
Secondly, and following on from the previous point, both John and Jesus declined the positions of power offered to them, choosing instead to follow their calling. Again, this comes from a deep knowledge of their ministry. Do I have the trust in God to surrender power when it is offered to me if it isn’t my place or calling? [Pause, perhaps repeat the question]

Thirdly, John uses his platform not to promote himself but to signpost to someone far more marginalised than he. Do I have the humility to use times when I am powerful to highlight others, particularly those less privileged than myself? [Pause, perhaps repeat the question]

If like me, you suspect the answer to some of these questions is no, then why not take some time in Advent, a time for reflection and preparation, to spend time in the wilderness. To spend time in conscious contact with God, to get to know yourself as God made you, and reflect on your role in the Kingdom.

Eating locusts is entirely optional!

**Suggested intercessions**

Lord we pray for our world, we pray that wise decisions are made by all nations. We pray particularly for areas of the world where social distancing is impossible, refugee camps and slums.

After a minute

Lord in your mercy; **Hear our Prayer or words more familiar to your church.**

Lord, we offer up our local community. We give thanks for all those who are sacrificing time, comfort and money to keep us safe. In the silence of your heart think of a place in your community which needs God’s protection.

After a minute

Lord in your mercy; **Hear our Prayer or words more familiar to your church.**
Lord, we pray for those who are sick in body, mind or spirit at this time. May they know your peace and your healing touch at this tough time. We pray for those who are isolating or shielding, separated from family and friends, may you comfort them. We pray also for those who are not safe at home, who may be experiencing increased anxiety or depression at this time, may you comfort them. In the silence of our hearts, we pray for someone known to us.

After a minute

Lord in your mercy; Hear our Prayer or words more familiar to your church.

Lord, we pray for the departed and those who mourn them. Help those who mourn process their grief in this unsettling time, where the strange comfort of a funeral is not available in the way they perhaps envisaged. Help us as a community seek to find ways to help commemorate those lost once it is safe to do so. In the silence of our hearts, we pray for someone known to us.

After a minute

Lord in your mercy; Hear our Prayer or words more familiar to your church.

Suggested hymns/songs

Please feel free to pick some favourite songs from your own hymnal, or, use some of these below:

- On Jordan’s bank [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Il3adNhVgL4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Il3adNhVgL4)
- Holy, Holy, Holy [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AgHrNNM23p8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AgHrNNM23p8)
- Spirit of the living God [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y2t3TfhQNE8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y2t3TfhQNE8)
- Come, thou long expected Jesus [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JGGcqhKShQ8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JGGcqhKShQ8)
- Love divine all loves excelling [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JGGcqhKShQ8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JGGcqhKShQ8)
- Dear Lord and Father of mankind [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WqOnjmr9Ah0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WqOnjmr9Ah0)
- O come, o come Emmanuel [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7xtpJ4Q_Q-4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7xtpJ4Q_Q-4)
Ideas for all-age worship

A simple way to demonstrate that we all have different but necessary roles to play is to do something like giving each person a piece of a jigsaw and asking people to come and place it. Obviously, I don’t recommend a 1000-piece jigsaw unless you have some expert jig-saw players. A Covid safe version of this could be giving people letters or words to make up a sentence or more amusingly a joke – the cornier the better!

Another way of demonstrating a theme of this passage – sticking to your calling – is to ask someone to complete a quiz. When the person has an answer, bombard them with questions like ‘are you sure?’ ‘do you not want to go for?’ etc. At the end ask the person how easy it was to stick with their original answer when all the questions were flying, in particular you could stress that you have to be confident in your answer to not change it when you were being grilled.