

'The coming word of God'

Grace be with you and peace from God, our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ

The Prophet of the Most High will be the Lord's forerunner, to prepare his way and lead his people to a knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins. – Lk.1,76-77

Collect:

Almighty God, you sent your servant John the Baptist to prepare your people to welcome the Messiah. Inspire the ministers and stewards of your truth to turn our disobedient hearts to you, that when the Christ shall come again to be our judge we may stand with confidence before his glory; who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen

'God rest you merry, gentlemen,
Let nothing you dismay,
For Jesus Christ our Saviour
Was born upon this day,
To save us all from Satan's power
When we were gone astray;
O tidings of comfort and joy comfort and joy!
O tidings of comfort and joy!'

Reading: **Mal.3,1-4 / Lk.3,1-6**

Dear friends

'The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.' I single out this sentence because you might overlook in the busy-ness of what is going on around it, what a momentous thing it is when the word of God comes to someone in order through their voice to be spoken to others. Where the word of God comes you have divine activity! Let us make space for this. Let us clear out those rooms in our hearts and minds that are made for receiving the messenger of good news, but are so often filled with much clutter and junk.

'The word of God came to John'. Through his voice it comes to us all who await the coming of the Saviour, for it is this coming that John pointed to. What came to John is the word *of* God that went before the word that *'was God'* and *'became flesh and made his dwelling among us'*. (Jn.1,1-14) This connection between the word of God that came to John and the word that was God and was coming into the world (our world!) is all important, because it's both of the one divine saving activity. In his Gospel the Apostle John put it in this way: *'There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.'* (Jn.1,6-9)

'The word of God came to John .. in the wilderness.' Now there is a curious thing here, I wonder if you noticed it. On its way to John in the wilderness, as it were, the word of God passed straight by Tiberius Caesar and the entire machinery, so highly effective, of Roman administration, went straight past Herod and Caiaphas the high-priest, past Rome and Jerusalem; it left to one side those great centres of power and learning, of aspiration and influence, of ideals and religious thought, where connectedness was all the rage and where progress was the name of the game. Why so?

Did it signal that the political, cultural and religious elite, the combined powers of wealth, dominance of all sorts and knowledge had no need of the word of God?

This may indeed have been the opinion of those who at the time looked at John in the wilderness as nothing more than a curiosity. And it may be the opinion today still of those who regard the preaching of the gospel as more or less a curiosity, not a means of serious preparation and repentance, but at best one of moral entertainment.

But is the truth not this? That the bypassing of these (all these!) splendid monuments to human accomplishments, self-belief and progress expresses divine judgment on all human promises of salvation?

Let not the heart be taken in by promises of salvation which rest on human activity and self-belief – that of others or your own. The promise that the salvation of our lives and of the world can be placed in our own hands ignores fundamentally our accountability before God and the reality of sin. Instead let us go to where God's word came, to John in the wilderness, and hear his voice, not as those who promise salvation or seek it wherever it is offered but as those who seek it where it is promised.

Because here is promised the coming of God's salvation!

And having noted that the word came not to the great centres but to John, there is now another thing we need to note as we prepare for the coming of God's salvation, such that we receive it: For the word of God that came to John in the wilderness – should we not ask *whose* word it is?

But it is the word of the God of comfort and joy! In the words running up to the ones about the voice in the wilderness Isaiah says this: *'Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.'* (40,1-2)

Here too, as we hear of comfort and joy, it is important to understand this in terms of divine action done for us and to us, and not in terms of human action done by us!

I recently happened to hear an announcement of a news item to come later on in the program on the radio about somebody who would be giving "wise words" (yes!) about making our experience of Christmas this year (more challenging circumstances) still one of comfort and joy. My heart sank at the prospect of hearing yet again many words about comfort and joy, involving many things from

baking and tinsels to atmospheric lighting and having friends and family round, all at a modest budget, but unable completely to address the real issue and bring the comfort and joy the heart longs for, because they do not account for God nor for the word He sent: no words to tell us to prepare and get ready for God's coming so that we may know the comfort and joy that He alone is the author of!

'The word of God came to John .. in the wilderness': If in our advent celebrations and Christmas preparations we do not in some sense leave our "Rome" and "Jerusalem", get ourselves up and away from those cultural and religious comfort zones and playgrounds, and take ourselves into the wilderness that is God's word, to hear and do it, we shall be as unprepared as anyone in "Rome" and "Jerusalem" for God's divine activity that brings comfort and joy.

And being unprepared, dear friends, is that not to prepare oneself for the side of divine activity that is the coming wrath? *'But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap.'* (Mal.3,2)

And when we take ourselves into the wilderness that is God's word in the voice of John, we learn that it is our sin and our awareness of it that prepares the way for the coming of God's salvation. *'He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance of the forgiveness of sins.'*

Dear friends, the picture of nature rolling out the red carpet for God's coming through valleys being filled in and mountains and hills being made low, is an illustration that says: The heart that knows of its sin, its unworthiness before God, its disruptive nature towards what is made for goodness and holiness, the love it has for self and the rule of self, and recognising as much by repentance, is rolling out the red carpet for the coming of God's salvation. Through the One who is coming this heart will know the comfort and the joy that God alone is the author of, and that will be a new birth unto life. Let the heart hear of the coming of its comfort and its joy. AMEN

Lord God, to your name be all praise. You have not left the world to its own devices but have sought it in love and mercy in order to enable in man a change of heart so we should not perish, but have everlasting life. All people will see your salvation. So says your word. And so does your Word, even our Saviour Jesus Christ. Grant us, gracious God, to come away from the proud places the heart likes so much to occupy and recognise our heart for the wilderness it is, that we may know the comfort and joy of your coming. Help us to take to heart your word of salvation in the forgiveness of our sins through Jesus Christ. Amen

- time of prayer / intercession – [what concerns we have on our heart we pour out before God and seek in thanksgiving the gifts of His blessings;]

we ask to discern His judgments and for a spirit of understanding and repentance, for mercy and an end to the spiritual ignorance whereby we fail to reject and abhor sin and wickedness;

we plead for the lost, the broken, the sick, the lonely, the abandoned, the persecuted, the suffering...;

we pray for a resolution to the migrant crisis in Belarus, on our own borders, for a mitigation of the tensions rising between the nations, for diplomatic efforts to bring peace to areas of conflict, for the victims of famine and of war;

we pray for our friends, brothers and sisters in Siliguri;

we think of the victims and the ongoing trouble of the pandemic in our country and around the

world and pray for those who care for the ill and for those tasked with keeping the people safe and for faith and courage...;
we pray for the authorities and those in leadership, for our communities;
we thank God for His guiding and keeping, for all the ways in which we discern his helping hand;
we pray:]

'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen

Look forward in hope to the coming of your Saviour, prepare the way for Christ your Lord; welcome him with love and faith when he comes in glory.

And the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be among you and remain with you. AMEN
