

# Sermon 6 December 2020 – Advent 2

Isaiah 40.1-11 and Mark 1.1-8

May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Whilst Christmas might be the season to be jolly, Advent is the season to be challenged, and to act.

It is an uncompromising four weeks when, year on year, we're invited to consider things which are not easy to get our heads and hearts around.

We're invited to find hope.

We're invited to repent.

We're invited to get ourselves ready.

We're invited to prepare for Christ's return.

And a key person in this season is John the Baptist who we focus on today and next week too.

John the Baptist, himself, was an uncompromising person in the long tradition of outspoken prophets. He was uncompromising in his message – “rethink”, he said, “and be baptised”. He was a challenging person to be around. He lived as he preached and, so we read, “people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him”. The Gospel writer Mark is clear that John was big and influential, but he was just the warm-up act, because the main act was yet to come. John said: “I have baptised you with water; but he – the one's who's coming – he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.”

John the Baptist was doing the Advent thing. He was making things ready. He was preparing the way. He was the messenger pointing to the message. Get ready for the Messiah. Rethink! Start again! Be prepared!

Many have commented in these recent months that living with the pandemic, as we are doing, is making us all rethink. I guess that is what a crisis does. It forces us to recalibrate; to refocus; to decide on what is most important.

The season of Advent is a season of crisis, when we are invited to recalibrate and refocus: to pause and reflect, and to ask ourselves the difficult questions about life, death, relationships, priorities and to change, to change so that we are more ready and more prepared for Christ's return.

So how do I do that? How do you do that? How do we do that?

The first thing, I think, is to allow ourselves to be made uncomfortable. Because whilst we remain content and comfortable, nothing is likely to change. The work of the prophet and

the work of John the Baptist was firstly to make people discontent and then, and only then, could they begin to rethink and take the step of baptism in water.

And here my experience tells me that the Holy Spirit, whilst known as the comforter, is equally adept at being the one who can bring discomfort.

So, in this Advent season, I invite you to pray; to pray that the Holy Spirit would make you uncomfortable and discontent in those areas of your heart and mind that could benefit from some rethinking.

Secondly, it is then from that sense of “dis-ease” and “dis-content” that we can begin to attend, again with the help of the Holy Spirit, to whatever within us needs wrestling with.

I do not believe that it’s possible to engage seriously and effectively with the season of Advent without also engaging with wrestling with oneself.

How ready are we to meet our maker?

How could we be different? What needs to change in me?

How many of the fruits of the Spirit (as listed in Galatians chapter 5) are evident to others in my life? – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control?

So perhaps some engaging in some kind of self-audit might be helpful. You could do this by finding some time by yourself with a bible, a piece of paper and a pen. Begin by praying and asking the Holy Spirit to help you reflect on your life and on what is important to you.

You could ask yourself how well you currently do with exhibiting the fruits of the Spirit. Or you could ask yourself what are your priorities in life – you can often discover that by looking at where we spend your money and how we spend our time. Many of us find this kind of self-audit exercise quite tricky. We need to be patient with ourselves and listen carefully to the promptings of the Spirit.

This is not a self-help exercise. Rather this is you looking in a mirror and asking God to reveal to you areas of your life that would benefit from some attention.

The prophetic call of John the Baptist is “Repent” or as I’ve been saying, “Rethink”. Change direction. Stop and reboot. Empty the bin; defrag; run the virus health checker.

Evening Prayer in the Advent season has the following prayer as part of the beginning of evening prayer. This prayer:

“May your word be a lantern to our feet and a light upon our path that we may behold your coming among us. Strengthen us in our stumbling weakness and free our tongues to sing your praise.”

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It is the light of Christ that searches us out and searches within us. There can be no hiding from the truth about ourselves. And here I'm not thinking only about our personal failures, but also about our attitudes: the way in which we treat or mistreat others. The way in which we judge or misjudge others. The ways in which we hide our real selves and wear a mask of respectability. The ways in which we think of ourselves as better than others. The ways in which we think of ourselves as worse than others.

"Lord, we pray, give us a true and proper understanding of ourselves. Give us a true and proper understanding of others. And may we be compassionate towards ourselves and towards them."

The light of Christ is a compassionate and a merciful light which, like a good doctor, is there to remove the cancer of ungodliness and dis-ease.

To allow the light of Christ to shine in our hearts can be a deeply uncomfortable thing, BUT - and this is a big BUT - it is the beginning of healing and wholeness and what the Bible calls Shalom - peace and integration.

You, and I, are invited this Advent to do whatever it takes for us to be more ready to meet the Lord, who will come like a thief in the night, and without notice and without any warning.

And then, in confidence we'll be able to say, "Amen, Come Lord Jesus."

And Evening Prayer in Advent ends with these words: "May the Lord, when he comes, find us watching and waiting." Amen.