

3rd Sunday of Advent
John 1.6-8 & 19-28
Sunday 13th December 2020
10.30am Cathedral Eucharist Bradford Cathedral

Heavenly Father. Send your Holy Spirit to open your hearts and minds to your redeeming love. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Murmurs and rumours of hope drifted out of the desert, and people went in search, with longing hearts, that God's voice might be heard once again.

They travelled far and wide. They were hungry for hope because they lived in a time of darkness - a time of injustice - where the rich got richer and the poor got poorer. And there they found it, in the most unlikely person of John, the messenger, living out the words of the prophet Isaiah.

John's austerity and lifelong devotion to God was intimidating and frightening, yet his holiness shone like a beacon.

And so the people began to journey, from their towns and villages, some, of course, out of curiosity, but many out of a hopeful longing, that they would meet with God through John. They already had faith in God, but what they longed for was the words of the prophet Isaiah to come to fruition; for God's promise to come true, that He would save them.

Of course, to the religious authorities John was dangerous, untameable, undignified, uncultured, irreverent. He would never be part of the establishment. He was a danger to the system, the status quo and therefore he would always be unwelcome.

And, if we're being brutally truthful, if he was to appear in our churches today, would we react in the same way? He was wild and dangerous. Possibly a distraction to our worship and prayers.

Two millennia ago, John made the religious establishment deeply uncomfortable, because they had become detached from the God who made heaven and earth; a righteous God who cares deeply about injustice, and all the peoples. A God where no-one is beneath His concern.

John's call in the desert, to repent, wasn't just those who wandered out to see and hear him, it was for the whole of Israel.

To repent, turn from their ways of indifference towards the poor and the marginalized, the widow and the sick, to abandon their selfish ways, their obsession with suffocating religious practices and turn back to the light of God with love in their hearts for him and all creation.

Today we find ourselves in a world rife with injustice.

But how far are we prepared to travel, to find murmurs and rumours of hope, and where do we look?

2020 has been brutal for many: the cries of the poor, the lonely and the isolated, fill our land. The growing sense of injustice as, well, the rich still get richer and the poor get poorer. Society is increasingly hungry for hope. This Christmas many have decorated their homes early: there is a deep longing for comfort and hope. But no matter how beautiful we make our homes, the baubles and tinsels cannot meet that deep longing of our hearts to find light in the darkness. We are searching, all of us, for murmurs and rumours of hope.

The austere figure of John the Baptist, stripped of all the usual comforts of this world, reminds us that real hope is not found in materialism, but in the word of God. Only our God, the God of heaven and earth, can bring hope, light in the darkness, and save us.

John appeared as a solitary figure in the desert, but he was never alone. From before his birth he was utterly dependent on God: embracing his vocation to be God's messenger.

John's long-life faithfulness meant that he was able to fulfil God's calling, to witness to the light, the Light of Jesus Christ.

Like John, we are called to be witnesses to the light, to point out to the world the truth of the real Good News: the real meaning of Christmas.

Today we are the voices carrying the messages of hope to a world shrouded in darkness.

All of us are called by God to witness in our own unique way.

What we know in our hearts we will speak on our lips...

Only when we still ourselves, and wait upon God, can we find out what that is.

We are called to worship, to pray and share fellowship as a community of believers, but we are also called into an intimate relationship with God.

It is the only way we can be truly faithful to God and His calling on each one of us individually.

Like John that calling can sometimes feel uncomfortable, and even isolating, as we wrestle to understand what that might be. It is a calling, which some will require great personal sacrifice. Many of you have already made great personal sacrifices, to follow God and to be true. It is not for the faint of heart.

When we consider the person of John the Baptist, he was an uncomfortable person to have around. He spoke truth with courage, and his single-minded faithfulness to God, made him a person that religious authorities feared.

He did not follow or allow fear to redefine God's calling in his life, and neither did he allow the establishment of the day, to confine and force him to conform to the status quo; enabling his message to ring out, and clear even from the desert wastelands.

People came to listen because of the integrity of his speech and his whole-hearted commitment to God. That is holiness.

People came in search because they were already looking for HOPE.

And today people in our society are looking for HOPE.

Following God, is not about conforming to the status quo, especially when the status quo of our society is so full of injustice, when the cries of the poor are heard in our streets, and children go hungry and asylum seekers are left fearful.

We are indeed a land of great darkness, but we are the voices that are called to courageously speak up, so that those who are looking for hope can find it in the redeeming love of Jesus.

Every single one of us can do that. We are all called to share that good news.

Karl Barth noted in his book 'The Great Promise' that "John the Baptist is no independent figure. He belongs entirely to Christ... he is only there to collect and give back the light that falls upon him from the figure of the one and only Christ. Thus standing there, being totally dependent, and being totally man and sinner, and totally serving"

It is from within our intimacy of God, in the place of waiting that we then find our voices, our voice to proclaim to the world... that Jesus is here: born, crucified and risen from the dead because of his love for us and all humanity.

It is in the intimacy that we are shaped by God's voice and heart, where the words we then speak are born in love and spoken in power.

God calls us to be witnesses, to reflect his light, and his love, into the darkest places of our world.

But we can only witness to what we know... so I encourage you all: find time with God. Make space in your hearts and in your lives. And allow God to shape you and all that comes from within you, so that you, and I, and all of us together, may reflect his light.

May the murmurings and rumours of hope, spread far and wide this Christmas, and our nation be transformed by God's redeeming love. Amen.