



## Watch, wait . . . and listen

John the Baptist bursts onto the scene, the wild-man prophet who is both strange and familiar, and confirms to us, in case we were in any doubt, that we are in Advent. We hear once again the age old refrain, Prepare the way of the Lord! There is, in many ways a sense of both excitement and comfort in singing some of the well-known Advent hymns.

And yet, each year it is different. Each year, the things happening in our world and our lives, influences both our understanding and experience of Advent. And each year, different phrases from our readings stand out. If we think of the model of reading the text with our head, our heart and our feet, then it's the 'heart reading' and that's struck me most this week.

For the phrase that first jumps out to me hearing this Gospel this week is not about preparation, or proclamation, or baptism or sacrament, it's about unity: "And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins." All the people of Jerusalem, going out together, repenting, confessing their sins, being washed in the river. Sadly, that image of unity is a very far cry from the scenes we've witnessed in Jerusalem, the West Bank, Gaza, and now Bethlehem, following the US President's announcement earlier this week. One man speaks - seemingly deaf to widespread disapproval from the international community and the Pope - and in another land, violence breaks out and people are injured and killed. As we watch and lament, so we pray for the peace of Jerusalem and the Holy Land; and we pray that the angels' song of peace for all humankind may be one day heard and heeded, however hopeless the current situation may seem.

John the Baptist was the first prophet to emerge on the scene in around three hundred years. We can well imagine the people were beginning to lose hope, to question the status quo, to wonder if God was still listening. And then suddenly John appears, every inch the archetypal prophet, so much so that

even in the year zero he appeared to be dressed from a bygone age.

We are struck at first by John's startling appearance, his dramatic entry, his uncompromising and urgent cries to "Repent". His survival-style diet implies John's been living in the wilderness for some years. He's clearly spent much time in prayer, listening to God, and now has no doubt about his mission. We are often so focussed on his part in the bigger story that we overlook some of the details of his own extraordinary life. This larger than life character displays a surprising and genuine humility. He the first to point out his unworthiness in the face of the One who is to come.

Luke tells us of the miraculous circumstances surrounding his birth to the elderly priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, and of how Zechariah was struck dumb until John's birth, but nothing of his upbringing. But here in Mark, like Jesus, John simply enters as an adult and there is no mention of them being cousins, and indeed, when Jesus comes to be baptised, there is no indication the two have ever met before. Later Mark relates John's imprisonment by Herod, and his subsequent beheading as a result of Herod's foolishness.

We're told precious little else about John, other than the huge numbers of people who came flocking to be baptised by him; who were so moved by his words and his message that they left the city with its synagogues and temple and came instead in their droves miles out into the wilderness; they left behind the religious authorities to experience the unique ministry of John. They listened with their hearts and recognised the call.

We often talk of Advent as a time of watching and waiting, but for me, a vital part is listening. Making time to draw aside and spend time in silence, listening for whatever God might want to say, listening with our hearts for any trace of that still small voice within.

As we hear the prophets' cries, and as we are bombarded with some of the loudest and most powerful voices of our time, I am conscious of all the voices that aren't being heard, those whose voices are drowned out or deliberately silenced by others, those who need to speak inconvenient truths. I am also aware, in this season of both hope and hype, of all those whose song this Christmas is one of lament, loneliness, or loss. I'm aware of those who don't feel able to speak because they don't feel able, or don't know how, to voice that distress or pain.

As preparations continue out of sight in our tower room, we prepare to welcome some of those silent voices into our church in the form of an art installation by war artist Arabella Dorman. All week volunteers have been helping Arabella to prepare boxes and boxes of clothes discarded in refugee camps and along the routes travelled on – paths that are by no means straight or level or clear, paths that involve risk and fear in equal measure, paths of pain and peril. The clothes - those of displaced people of all ages - will be hung from the ceiling.

We wait in suspense to see exactly how the installation will look, knowing that like this season of Advent, it will be solemn, sacred and challenging. It will search us as we gaze upon it, and as we do so, as with the refugee boat suspended above us two Christmases ago in Arabella's first installation here, if we not only gaze upon it, but listen with our hearts, we will begin to hear the stories of those once wore the garments. We will be echoing the cry of the prophet in amplifying the call for the UK government to honour its commitment in receiving more unaccompanied minors into this country before Christmas. We seek not just to listen, and not to speak for refugees but to create a space where their voices can be heard.

It's in Advent that I'm most aware of the tension between the Church and the world outside. I've

pretty much got used to Easter eggs going on sale at the end of December, but in my heart of hearts, I still rail against the premature advent of Christmas, the 12 day season that for the Church begins on Christmas Eve and for the world outside begins sometimes as early as late August and ends on Boxing Day. We need time to prepare, time to embrace the darkness, time to listen in the silence, to engage with the pain of our world. Only then can we hear and respond to the prophet's cry and the miracle and mystery God of breaking into the world.

At this darkest time of the year, much of our most important work takes place out of sight. It is in our studies that those struggling with burdens can lay them down (at least for a while), that hidden fears and griefs and guilt are named and brought into the light. The church is full most evenings with carol services and concerts, but it's in the basement that we hold our night shelter for those who are homeless and our international breakfasts for those without recourse to public funds. It's downstairs that our fantastic teams of volunteers not only prepare and cook and welcome and serve, but most importantly, alongside enjoying music, games and art with our guests, engage in listening, in providing a safe space where stories can be shared and hopes and dreams voiced.

May we each as the church and in our own lives, follow in the footsteps of not only the disciples, but also the prophets; to dare to believe that change will come, to proclaim justice; to comfort the down-trodden, restore hope and listen with our hearts.

And so we pray:

*God of the wilderness and of the dark forgotten places, meet us in this place and in every place, speak to us through the silence that we may know you and be prophets of your love and hope in your world today. Amen.*

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