

## Sunday 14 December 2008: Third Sunday of Advent

### The disturbance of God

**Readings: Isaiah 61.1-4, 8-11; John 1.6-8,19-28**

One of the things that makes Advent so unsettling a season is that the stories leading to the birth of Jesus are full of surprises. John the Baptist stood so strongly in the prophetic tradition that some faithful Jews thought he must be its fulfilment. But I love the way the scriptures show people who should know, not having a clue. The Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask John the Baptist, "Who are you?" They start at the top and work down.

"Are you the Messiah?"

"I am not."

"Elijah, one of the prophets...Who?"

And John quotes Isaiah, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord'."

Each week in Advent the lighting of the Advent candles is a reminder that the birth of Jesus Christ was long expected, according to the scriptures. Each candle reminds us of Abraham and Sarah, the Prophets, John the Baptist and, next Sunday, Mary, all of whom precede and in some ways point to Jesus as the Messiah.

It's in the scriptures, and the priests and Levites knew their scripture, but somehow they missed its meaning *and* its application.

It's no better at the end of the Gospels. After being with Jesus for about three years, the followers of Jesus didn't get Good Friday and Easter. The eleven disciples stayed but others started to leave Jerusalem bewildered. Two were walking to Emmaus on Easter Day and needed the stranger to take them through the scriptures before they understood their fulfilment in Jesus. Oddly enough, it's not the scriptures that convince them but the sudden realisation of an encounter with Jesus in the breaking of bread. So excited, they raced back to Jerusalem to tell the others, only to find the eleven gathered together and saying that the Lord had risen and he has appeared to Simon. They also knew their scripture, and what happened was in fulfilment of the scriptures, but they didn't 'get it'. Far from scripture leading their understanding, their experience rushed ahead and a reinterpretation of the scriptures made a supporting case.

Of course *we* know this is the pattern and the Christmas stories depend on it. The young teenager, not yet married, chosen to the handmaid of the Lord. The birth in Bethlehem, not in Jerusalem, made known first to shepherds on the hillside, working men not quite to be trusted whatever the scriptures say about good and courageous shepherds because they were unable to keep the purity laws of Judaism, and Wise men who enquired of Herod the King in Jerusalem where the child who was to be king had been born... and so on. The God of surprises is part of our scriptural orthodoxy.

So what are we to make of John the Baptist and his fulfilment of what has become known as the Isaiah agenda we heard in our first reading? Good news to the oppressed, binding up the broken hearted, liberty for captives and release for prisoners.

Prophetic figures, especially people who live outside the system, crying in the wilderness, sometimes appear to clarify things most of us have become too used to. But if John the Baptist is proclaiming a political agenda, I find it confusing and simplistic.

The complex issues of our life together rarely polarise and clarify in ways that political issues can become a matter of faith. There are very few examples when political and moral beliefs have become articles of faith for Christians. Two examples I can think of are:

- Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Churches opposition to Hitler
- and the South African Churches opposition to Apartheid.

In both cases there were substantial numbers of Christians who took contrary views and supported the Nazi project for purity or saw the separate development of racial groups as in some way fulfilling the work of God.

Other attempts don't look so convincing and are divisive of the churches

- the Right to life movement
- even the world development movement where there is real and proper division about how best to build greater justice.

Of things that have been in the news this week, there is no single Christian position in relation to the murder of Jean Charles de Menezes, the assisted suicide of Daniel James, the economic crisis, or the occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan. Though the Isaiah agenda and John the Baptist say those who are innocent, those who feel trapped and imprisoned by despair or grief, those who long for the welfare of others and who seek to build peace will find a glorious freedom and liberty within the life of Christ.

So we Christians might be wise to be cautious about making moral and political judgements that seek to polarise and divide for the sake of simplicity and clarity.

The Biblical tests of prophecy are not clarity and simplicity but whether this fits with a tradition of what we know about God, whether it fits with previous experience of God – recognising that sometimes this involves a radical revision of the tradition, as with Jesus being according to the scriptures. And the other rather less helpful test as we try to discern the way forward is, does it come true. That's really only helpful retrospectively.

Christianity is not just personal and individual but social and corporate in the literal sense that we are the body of Christ and as different members we belong together.

In our Advent book, 'The Meaning is in the Waiting', Paula Gooder says,

*In some ways John is the epitome of Advent: a figure in whom the past and future meet in an explosive message for the present. John may be called to waiting but his waiting can hardly be called passive; John's is an abrasive, disruptive, unsettling waiting - a waiting that is about as active as it is possible to be.*

John the Baptist is a disturber. Perhaps that's the best we can do, to be open to the challenge of the disturbance of God and to live as people who believe that we belong together and not on our own. This is what we witness to each week in our shared worship, and it is extraordinarily subversive. Somehow that gets disguised by the gentle beauty and order of what we do liturgically and the choir singing at the start of these Advent services, "Drop down ye heavens from above and let the skies pour down righteousness" but that experience of God come among us is profoundly disturbing.