

## **Sunday December 2005: Advent 3**

### **John the Baptist and Hope for an Anxious World**

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

We live in anxious times. This morning's news of explosions at a fuel depot in Hertfordshire brought forward one 'witness' to say a plane was seen flying into the depot. The Police have said this is unfounded. Someone else told of the excellent safety record of the depot and spoke of the likelihood of terrorism. It is too early to say but the Police say they are treating it as an accident. What we think we saw, the way we interpret events, shows we're anxious.

The threat of terrorism is just one source of our anxiety. We are anxious about the breakdown of community locally and globally. London is prospering as never before. A headline in the Evening Standard two months ago proclaimed: "3,000 new City Millionaires". Yet Inner London continues to have by far the highest rates of poverty in Great Britain. Poverty, defined as households with incomes below 60% of median income, in Inner London affects 48 per cent of children, 35 per cent of pensioners and 27 per cent of working age adults. This level of income gap between the richest and poorest strains a community's ability to cohere.

Globally, it is similar but even more complex, as we have seen through our involvement with this year's campaign to Make Poverty History. We would have to be crassly insensitive or lack imagination not to be anxious, perhaps particularly because even after recognising the problems, it's not so easy to get international agreements and for us to act together on them.

The same is true about the environment. Yesterday's jubilation at the end of the UN climate change conference marked significant political progress, but it still feels as though we are driving too fast and into oblivion.

And then there are those things over which we could never have much or any control and which threaten to overwhelm us, not just individually. It has been a year of disasters: the tsunami, the hurricanes in the Gulf and the earthquake in Pakistan and India, all emphasising our powerlessness. To cap it all, a scientific conference this week examined the long overdue statistical possibility of a large asteroid slamming into the earth and wiping us out. It was striking that part of the conference was given over to what could be done to deflect large objects away from the earth, as if we could have power over them.

If you came to church this morning wanting good cheer then I am sorry. At least John the Baptist went into the wilderness to preach, not the city centre. But then it sounds as though thousands of people followed him out there. Perhaps it was with the ghoulish fascination with which people are attracted to disasters. "Come on John, give us more. Tell us how bad it's really going to get."

The sense of hopelessness in our world is striking and we would be fools to ignore it but the reason we're still telling stories about John the Baptist now is because he wasn't just heard as a despairing voice in the wilderness but pointed people to a prophetic hope for something better. So what are the grounds of this hope on which we can stand this Advent?

First, John the Baptist came in the wilderness. The desert is a fantastic place in which to face reality. It is always tempting to say things will be alright and make ourselves comfortable but in the wilderness we're 'stripped down', honest and real. Away from the pretensions with which we usually surround ourselves. So the first task is to face up to reality and describe ourselves right and have to face up to reality. Bad things *do* happen to good people and it would help us to live with an awareness of the edge given by our knowing the end of the world might be nigh.

Second, John the Baptist proclaimed repentance for the forgiveness of sins. That's a turning ourselves around and facing God. It's not a standing by with ghoulish fascination as observers, but as people who are agents of personal and social change and transformation. At an individual level it's about the hundreds of small acts of personal kindness that so characterises this congregation and this place. They are worth celebrating. If you have been watching the TV programmes about making Slough happy you will have seen that acts of kindness are a personal way of making yourself and the people around you happier. On a bigger scale, we've had a fantastic response to the Christmas Appeal this year. Volunteers answering the phones in the office last Sunday kept telling me they were pleased to help. Letters repeatedly say things like, "It is my *privilege/pleasure* to enclose a donation for your work.... (with homeless people)".

Drawing out this instinct of people to help one another is key to our being human. We saw it in London this year after the bombings on 7 July. At a more organised level an organisation called Citizens is working with communities across London. At their annual meeting this week they told a fantastic story about drawing attention to the lack of a waiting area for people queuing for hours and days at the Immigration and Nationality Directorate at Lunar House in Croydon. By standing outside and serving cups of tea on a cold winter morning they got the Director down to ask what they are doing and began a relationship which has produced a report into the whole process and which promises serious change 'from the bottom up' by giving people who had thought they were powerless a voice.

That seems to me to be like the Isaiah agenda we heard in our first reading:

"...the Lord God ....  
has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,  
to bind up the broken hearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and release to the prisoners...."

Repentance is about our turning round, facing God and doing things different and it gives the poor hope.

Third, there 's the old Sunday school joke that it doesn't matter what the teacher's question is, the answer is always Jesus. John the Baptist pointed not to himself but to Jesus. The much more interesting question is who Jesus is and what difference he makes to the rest of humanity. That's what the rest of the Gospels go on to explore with their stories of God in human form, of wisdom and sacrificial love. In this Advent season above all what we are pointed to is the wonder and mystery and glory of God in a baby. We've all seen it and know it in any baby, but in this particular baby we remember at Christmas we see it fully as Love comes among us in human form and restores the hope through Jesus Christ our Lord.