

Sunday 6th December 2009: Second Sunday of Advent

A voice cries out

Readings: Philippians 1.3-11; Luke 3.1-6

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness...”

We hear today on our journey through Advent, of John the Baptist, crying out in the wilderness, calling people to turn to God, and to prepare for his coming amongst them, the ‘messenger’ preparing people to receive the ‘message’, the life and ministry of Jesus. It resonates with us as we are in that place of waiting, preparing ourselves to receive that same message afresh now, being drawn ourselves to prepare our hearts and lives for God’s coming amongst us. As with the people around John in his day, there’s a chance we won’t hear the voice, or we will hear it and won’t sense the authenticity or the urgency; that the landscape of our world, our culture or our preoccupations will be places where God’s ways are not recognised or invited; places so crammed that there is no stillness in which to listen, no space for him to be welcomed into.

A voice cries out because it has something to say; a sense of present injustice, and a vision of future hope that it just can’t hold in. The first reaction we ever hear of the child John is as a baby in the womb. His first response – a leap for joy. Before his birth John’s father Zechariah receives word that his son, filled with the holy spirit, will bring joy and gladness. Coming from a place of wilderness, John’s whole life is simply to live out that calling, to herald the hope and promises of God; urging people to turn their lives around so that they too can see, recognise and respond to God’s incarnate presence in the world – with joy. *His cry* is a response to God’s, who comes to speak his word to the world, in the life of Jesus.

Luke locates this voice, and so the beginnings of Jesus’ ministry, in a specific place and a specific time, an exact moment in history –as we hear in our Gospel reading. Although there are some discrepancies between the sources, his account is rooted in historical reality, in amidst the particular political and religious power brokers of the day – Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Philip, Lysanias, Annas, Caiaphas. His voice comes not from a place of power and privilege but from the wilderness. Somewhere that is unsettling, and challenging, that harbours a longing for a change of heart and a new way of looking at and seeing the world.

Yesterday, a voice cried out here in London, in this particular time and place, echoed all over the world. It was a voice that spoke up for many in the wilderness places of the earth that long for change, people living with the harsh reality of the effects of climate change. Over 20,000 people from all over the country demonstrated, calling for climate justice and urging governments, meeting at the Copenhagen Climate Change Summit, that starts tomorrow, to work for a radical world climate change agreement.

As the demonstration snaked down Whitehall, a sea of blue, placards waving - representing a wonderful mix of charities, faiths, community organisations and ecological groups; families, students, all generations and cultures; passionate, peaceful, upbeat; *one voice* called out for change. Like John’s cry, urging that something be done now. A series of events across London added volume to that voice, including a service of prayers and reflections here at St Martin’s in the morning to which two hundred people came.

Yesterday was a moment rooted in historical reality. Part of a wider contemporary call to repentance and change, to make paths straight, to make rough places smooth, to speak out for the most vulnerable in the poorer countries of our world, 'for whom' the director of Oxfam put it '*climate change is not something in the future, but something that is hitting them now.*'

Today, through the voice of this church we are speaking out and doing something about some of the mountains and valleys of social inequality. St Martin's, through our vicar Nicholas Holtam, spoke out for those who find it hard to have a voice, as it broadcast its Christmas Appeal on radio 4 this morning, raising money for those who are homeless and vulnerable here in London and those in need throughout the UK. If the response is anything like last year it will be an opportunity for thousands of people to respond with small acts of kindness and generosity, to make the mountain of trying to find a home possible to get over, the way a little smoother for someone whose life circumstances have dipped into the critical zone. These are often wilderness places, as a couple of lines from a poem written by Jamie express; a young man, who put his experiences of homelessness into his poetry at the writers group at The Connection at St Martin's:

*I am the spring waiting patiently for the summer to arrive.
I am the fox foraging in the wilderness.
I am the grey waiting to be mixed into something brighter.*

Yesterday and today, echoing John, voices speaking out for change across the mountain tops and valleys and the rough, crooked and unequal ways of our world and society, with a vision and hope for something better. Active in and through that, if we dare to look and recognise him God comes close, not through the powerful and influential, but through the ordinary and the marginalised and those on the outside and in unsettling and challenging situations.

Our theme for Advent, *Love bade me welcome*, based on George Herbert's poem, is God's call of forgiveness to us, offering to make *our* lives straight. We speak out against injustice and inequality but we are also part of it. He calls us to acknowledge where we are responsible and invites us to see and live differently.

Coming close, Jesus brings healing, simplicity and compassion, straightening the road and breaking down barriers. Inviting us to come from the mountains of prejudice, the valleys of indifference and fear, as we acknowledge the shame we feel for the neglect of the earth, our distance from our global neighbour, the walls of conflict that we build around ourselves; our own weaknesses and fears.

It is only if we allow ourselves to receive his forgiveness and love, in the crooked and rough parts of our lives, that we can understand what it means to be on level ground and in a smooth place, and join him on an even path, the place of reconciliation. And then be able to hold open that joyful, hopeful place for others.

In his joyful letter to the Philippians, a community he was particularly fond of, Paul's hope for them is that their love for God and for one another may overflow more and more as they connect more deeply to the ways and wisdom of God. Writing from prison to a group of people who have been through the wilderness of conflict and persecution, his message could not be more loving or hopeful. The sense is that he is writing from that broad, smooth place, aware of the length and breadth of God's generous love offered in Jesus, and that he is urging this Christian community to open their eyes to recognise that they are there too.

As with that community, God has begun a work in us. He has given us glimpses of the joy that made John leap in the womb; that drove him through the wilderness calling for change and a new way of living and loving. He has opened our eyes to recognise valleys and hills of inequality and injustice, and encouraged us through his forgiving love to begin to change. As we journey on this Advent may that awareness deepen more and more.

Some of the campaigners from yesterday's demonstration bivouacked last night around the Christmas tree in Trafalgar Square in the rain alongside the crib that will be blessed this afternoon. What better place for them to rest and for us to wait and prepare. At the broad, even place where Jesus comes to dwell with us, a place where everyone is welcome and equal and all have the opportunity to share in the joy anticipated by the voice from the wilderness. A place where lives can be changed and relationships with one another, with our earth, and with God, can be restored.