

Sunday 8th December – Advent 2 – Luke 3:1-6 ‘A New Prophet’

This Advent feels a bit like the story in reverse. We began last week with Luke 21 and Jesus in Holy Week, talking about his second coming – his second Advent – just before his death and resurrection. This week and next we go back to Luke chapter 3 and John the Baptist... and then in two weeks' time, on the 4th Sunday of Advent, we go back to the actual nativity story and Luke chapter 1 and Mary visiting Elizabeth and singing her famous song.

Although that seems weird to our modern ears, it's worth reminding ourselves that telling the whole Nativity story in Advent is a fairly recent thing. If you can imagine Christmas as a big, deep, luxuriant bath, what's happened with Christmas in the last 30 or 40 years is that we've somehow left the taps running and the Christmas bath has overflowed, not just to flood the Advent bathroom, but is now well on its way to seeping under the bathroom door and trickling down the stairs! It's all got a bit out of hand.

Previous generations didn't really tell the Christmas story until the Carol Service at the earliest, or even until Christmas itself – the season of Advent was a season of preparation. So, they focused on getting ready – ready for Jesus' second coming and then the other characters who help us get ready for Jesus – Gabriel, Zechariah or Elizabeth before Jesus' birth and, here, John the Baptist. And this year maybe there's something in that for us, too... PAUSE

Of the many characters in the biblical story, John the Baptist has to be one of the best, doesn't he? The camel hair clothing, the diet of locusts and honey... Be honest: you'd travel out into the desert to see what all the fuss was about, wouldn't you? I think I would.

In many ways, **John is the original, archetypal, crazy holy man**, isn't he? This kind of holiness feels a bit dangerous and exciting, doesn't it? I'm not suggesting that being holy requires eccentricity, as if somehow being a bit odd is a qualification for sainthood – but I'm sure many of us have met some very holy people over the years, and they have this sort of thing about them, don't they? Something that disturbs us, makes us a bit uncomfortable in their presence, but is somehow strangely compelling, magnetic even. We want to be around them, even though every time we are, we get that little frisson of nerves about what they might say or do next.

When I think modern-day examples of John the Baptist, I think of my friend Bob. Don't worry, he had a normal diet, and wore a brown leather jacket not camel hair. And he didn't live in the desert, he lived in Battersea. But Bob was a crazy holy man – in that kind of magnetic way – you never knew what he was going to do next, but he was absolutely saturated with God, and God used him to do extraordinary things. I hope most of us can think of a John or a Bob in our lives. Someone we would travel out to the desert – or to Battersea – to encounter.

John plays a vital role in preparing the way for the arrival of Jesus – but what is sometimes overlooked is how his ministry, as described in today's passage, connects with those lovely servant songs in the first two chapters of Luke. Mary, Zechariah and Simeon all sing of the coming agent of the Lord's salvation, God's chosen anointed one or Messiah. And what brings people out to the desert is unquestionably a growing excitement that this Messiah might have arrived. Many may have thought it was John himself; he certainly had the right credentials. However, as we'll see next week, he was always quick to point people away from himself towards Someone Greater.

Instead, John was the ‘voice of one calling’ (v4), the fulfilment of several important Old Testament prophecies that the Messiah would have a herald, someone to prepare the way – in particular the famous passage in Isaiah 40, which Luke himself quotes in vv4-6 of today’s passage, and which we looked at in detail last Advent.

And what is John’s call to Israel and indeed all humanity? ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all people will see God’s salvation.’

What a promise! *Something new is coming.* Something big. Something that reshapes the landscape – raises the valleys and squashes the mountains. We’re obviously used to this in Milton Keynes: the endless re-shaping of our landscape. Even in the 11 years I’ve been here, I’ve watched Oakgrove and Brooklands more or less built from scratch, and now Glebe Farm and Eagle Farm. I remember walking across the fields next to Newport Road in 2017 with the group of us that prayed every month for the new housing that was coming, and the people that would live in them, and watching a hare run across the field past a derelict farm shelter – and now the rough farm ways have become smooth – they’ve become Burney Drive and Montgomery Way and even Kenny Ball Avenue.

But this is not really physical re-shaping going on here – **it’s spiritual re-shaping. The rough ground of our spiritual lives is going to get levelled.** And all people will get the chance to see it.

The thing about mountains and valleys is that these are images of troublesome terrain. Bandits lived in the mountains, and valleys often symbolise difficult circumstances. But when the Messiah comes he’s going to deal with our spiritual enemies and the trouble that overwhelms us. It doesn’t mean that those things disappear, but the Lord makes a way through them. It’s like those mountains and valleys get levelled.

And this glorious passage invites us to follow in the train of this Messiah, as he levels the mountains and valleys, straightens the crooked paths and smooths the rough ways. We don’t have to do the levelling – the Lord does that. We just have to follow in his wake.

It’s a glorious promise – no wonder people went out into the desert to hear it from John. Today we don’t have to – we can read it in our bibles, we can receive it every time we worship, just like you’re doing today. But let’s never lose sight of that simple but beautiful message – **the Lord is coming. And this Lord will deal with our mountains and our valleys, our crooked paths and our rough ways.** What are yours? Give them to him again in faith today... PAUSE

Advent is a season to examine ourselves – to offer our mountains and our valleys, our crooked paths and our rough ways to him, to prepare our hearts again for the way of the Lord. And we do so, safe in the knowledge that Jesus the Messiah’s coming to us is a fact of history. That’s why Luke gives us that long list of rulers and priests at the start – he’s saying: people, this really happened. The Lord really did come – and here’s how the message starts to be preached through John.

John’s voice still calls to us today: prepare the way of the Lord! May the Lord grant us all grace to prepare our hearts again this season, that the glory of the Lord may be revealed. And may the Lord raise our faith to believe that we can overcome our mountains and our valleys, by his grace. Amen.