



Personal worship, 12th Dec 2021

Call to worship Zephaniah 3 : 14,15 and 17

Today we light the third candle on our Advent ring. It is for Joy and our call to worship was joyous indeed. The prophets had promised a Saviour and a new time of joy but first there would be a time of reckoning, and today our candle also honours John the Baptist, who brings a message about repentance and preparation.

Hymn 169 StF, 81 H&P, 102 MP 'Come thou long expected Jesus born to set thy people free!'

Prayers

'Loving God as we come to you this morning, longing to worship you – still our hearts, so that we may feel your presence with us and in us Lord God of Creation, as we await that longed for moment, when you will come to us as a tiny human child, we thank you for all that you, in Love, have created. The people we care about, the relationships we share with them, our very being, all begin with your love. Generous Lord, as we thank you for our warm homes and the food we eat, we think of Mary and Joseph setting out into the unknown. As we appreciate the beauties of the winter season, we think of all, who for whatever reason, are facing the unknown, at this time.

We ask that you will protect them and that they will find generous help and real compassion from those they meet. Caring Lord may we, in the days and weeks to come, find ways to reach out in love to others in your name. Forgiving Lord, we know that our walk with you is not as close as we would want it to be. Help us in this season of Advent to consider how we may come closer to you - how we may prepare for both the first and the second coming of Jesus our Saviour who bought for us the promise of forgiveness and eternal life.

We pray in his name. with the prayer he taught us.

Amen.

We join Luke's gospel this morning as Jesus prepares to begin his ministry on earth. During centuries of silence, God's people have wondered 'When will we hear a prophetic voice again? When will we have a new era and a new King? When, Lord God, will our longed-for Messiah come?' Suddenly there is movement and action as John appears - the prophet Isaiah's 'voice of one crying in the wilderness.

Read Luke 3: 7:18

Did it seem odd to be joining a crowd gathering to listen to John, while at the same time, we are eagerly awaiting Jesus birth? Perhaps, but we have knowledge, which those people, did not have, so we must leave our twenty first Christian viewpoint behind, and try to think ourselves into the body of somebody, in that crowd that day. Today we will eavesdrop on the thoughts of an imaginary soldier in that crowd. I can see him in my mind and I have given him a name - Judah ben Ari. He serves with one of the Jewish auxiliary units attached to the Roman Army. While using my imagination, I have tried to check facts for accuracy.

'Shalom! I am ben Ari. I'd heard about the new prophet, so I came this morning with a group from my unit, to look and to listen. We found him not far from where the Jordan flows into the sea of Galilee. 'Hey!' he shouted at all of us 'what warned you that God's anger is coming? You are a brood of serpents!' 'Well! I thought...that's a bit over the top! We all know what scripture says about that serpent in paradise, but all of us?... snakes?' Then he walked to a tree not far away and swinging an imaginary axe he pretended to chop it down. Next he mimed making a great pile of wood and setting it on fire. 'That's what is going to happen to you if you do not show fruits of repentance!' he cried 'stop counting on the fact that you are a child of Abraham because your Jewishness won't save you. God can create people from the stones lying around you.' 'Wow! that was really attacking the grounds of all I believed about myself and it was clear from that vivid mime of the felled tree and the fire, that punishment was on its way - but 'fruits of repentance' we whispered to each other 'whatever does he mean?'

Then somebody in the crowd asked 'What should we do?' 'Whatever food or clothing you have, give half of it away to those who have nothing!' he replied. He did not say 'if you are rich'.... no! he spoke to **all** about sharing. People, looked at each other and shuffled their feet. Then Moshe and a few of his friends stepped forward. He collects taxes in our village and beyond. He bought the right from Herod to tax - and over tax - his own Jewish people. He profits unfairly! Blood sucker! As you will guess, he is not the most popular person by any means so he and the other tax gatherers keep together. 'What should we do?' they asked John. 'Here we go!' I thought 'John will annihilate them,' but no, he looked at them and said 'Don't collect any more than you should!' Simple and straight forward!

Before I could stop myself, I asked 'and us soldiers what should we do? 'Yes!' chorused my friends 'What should we do?? John paused for a moment, and I thought about what I am, a Jew working for Rome and a traitor to some people. I could see condemnation in the looks all around me. As a Jewish man I cannot be forced to military service, but the promise of Roman citizenship for myself and for my children (once my twenty-five years of service is over), was too much to resist. Good wages and a settled life, against the pittance I could scrape from our family land - what choice did I have? - but it was not a popular move with family or friends so I waited for John to call us traitors.'

'Don't extort money or accuse people falsely, just be happy with your pay' he told us - no call to desert or to denounce my attachment to Rome - but a request to deal honestly in my career. Hmm! I thought 'I turn a blind eye when the provisions arrive and the cart driver keeps a bag or two for himself. He is a Jew like me and it sort of salves my conscience for serving Rome when my people are living under Roman rule. I'll stop doing that and return his backhanders, because I don't need that money. No better still, I will give it to the poor.....except that I don't think that is the sort of sharing John was talking about.

Accusing someone wrongly?... well I - don't **think** I've done that but I have watched others do it – so I suppose I am guilty of that as well.

'Repent!' John shouts again – 'repent and be baptised!'

Baptism! That is a new idea for me but I do want to be an honest God-fearing soldier, so I will wait my turn at the water's edge. John has a wild look and his clothes are primitive but he exudes a presence, a feeling of power. Could he be God's promise I wonder - the promise my people have waited for, and waited and waited. Words from the prophet Isaiah I learned as a boy come to my mind... "a voice of one calling in the

desert-prepare the way for the Lord....” But John is preaching again – talking about someone else, far more worthy, far more powerful who will come and baptise us with the fire of the Holy Spirit. He will come to sift the chaff from the grains of wheat. I’m mentally back on the farm, wielding the flail and winnowing the grain for the chaff to be burnt. I think how rapidly chaff is consumed by fire, and I shiver. Yes, there is punishment to come, but God has also promised salvation and that it seems will depend on repentance and a change of behaviour. Oh! - it is my turn next. Lord God of Abraham Isaac and Jacob, I truly repent and choose a new pathway for my life. Help me I pray, to change my ways, and to live up to the cleansing John says this baptism will bring.’ We leave him there, keeping in mind that scene by the Jordan as we sing

So dear friends we are now firmly back in the 21st century. We too, await the birth of the Messiah yet we know, as ben Ari did not know, that Jesus had already come. God become man, he would complete his mission, and make himself a willing sacrifice for our sakes. We also know that he lives forever and promises to return from his ascended place in glory.

John’s message to prepare and to repent for God’s coming is eternal. It is an invitation to us to think about our behaviour and our attitudes towards others. It is essentially, about how God sees our lives and the way that we live them, and about the things we should change in order to come nearer to the example Jesus gave us.

In the past weeks all my preaching seems to have been based on Jesus talking about riches and about sharing. He dismissed the idea, that riches are a reward for righteous living. He held up to scorn, those who ostentatiously, gave a small part of their riches, but commended the widow who from her poverty gave all she had. ‘Give it all away he told us!’ but Indeed, we might feel that that, could make more difficulties than it would solve. One can imagine the bottle neck, in paying out benefits, if we gave everything away and threw ourselves onto the state. But like John telling the crowd to share their food and clothing with those who had nothing I believe that we are being asked to look at the fairness or unfairness that we practice in our daily lives and to try to work for a more Christ centred way, of living.

That soldier was pretty self-aware, quick to pick up on his own faults, and to admit guilt even by default. Though he was tempted to try to wipe out a wrong by whitewashing it, he did see that it would not meet John’s requirements for repentance. In his interaction with the crowd tax collectors and soldiers that day John did not judge or ask for any more, than any decent human being would bring, to their interactions with others, but his answers suggest he knew his audience – just as God knows us.

In speaking through ben Ari, I found it so much easier to examine his conscience, than to examine my own! But God asks us to examine our lives and our behaviour. Do we for instance conserve our ‘riches’ for our nearest and dearest? Sharing is not just about food and clothing, although we will all have ample opportunity at this Christmas season to give both money and goods, but it is about standing alongside those in need and sharing their problems. And there are other ways of sharing. Through many sorts of time giving for instance, volunteering, visiting the lonely, or just being there for others in the midst of our busy lives. Is there a friend who has been on my conscience I wonder; a project I meant to support; or a family member who is struggling? Such matters, can be lost in what we see as ‘Doing God’s work’ We may never cheat someone as Moshe did, but do we perhaps take more than our share of less obvious things? Are we really fighting for change in the world or just thanking God that we will never lack water or

food? Do we continue to pollute without really thinking about it – and what about our personal carbon footprint?

With three trips to France to support an elderly friend this year that question makes me wriggle. There are so many difficult decisions and anomalies, as we think about John's words to the tax gatherers. Ben Ari's thoughts remind us of his awareness, that he could not cancel a wrong by turning a blind eye or by simply passing on the results' Do we justify things we know are less than Godly by converting them to something we see as worthwhile? And do we, as John accused those sons of Abraham of doing, believe that as baptised – in whatever form - members of the body of Christ we can simply claim righteousness?

Each of us at this Advent season must answer these soul-searching questions then repent and change. There is no time to lose for we do not know when Jesus will come again in might and majesty. 'Even I do not know when that will be' he told his disciples 'So BE READY!' Are we ready dear friends for that glorious second coming?

Hymn 550 StF, 381 H&P, 159 MP Forth in thy name O Lord I go!

Prayers of Intercession

Lord God for whom time as we know it does not exist, for whom a thousand years is just a moment, we come to you in this moment of what we call time, to pray, for the needs of your world.

Loving Lord, we live in a world where all the things that John cried out against are still rife. Cruelty, disdain, dishonesty, manipulation, selfishness and unwillingness to stand alongside others, still rule the minds of many.

We feel surrounded by darkness, yet we know that the darkness cannot extinguish even one small candle. We thank you, that there are actually many pockets of light and we pray this morning for the charities supporting refugees and combatting homelessness. We give thanks for the volunteers manning food banks and for those who give of their time to bring hope to the lost and lonely. We think in this moment of all we know and love who are in need of your care. We ask for strength for hard pressed health and care staff. They are your hands in this world. May they continue to be able to bring the love and compassion so much needed in this continuing pandemic.

Lord of All - the crowd John spoke to, at least acknowledged you. So many now, find you an irrelevance. They consider only self and selfish needs. In this season of Advent, we must somehow bring the message of repentance to a world that does not want to listen. Show us we pray how to promote brotherhood in the face of division and how to pass our sense of urgency to complacent leaders.

Lord we pray that each of us in our own small way, by walking more closely with you, may find ways to combat self-centredness and to share the message of love and light that Christmas brings. In Jesus name we pray. Amen

Hymn 185 StF, 602 MP Sing we the king who is coming to reign.

The Grace