

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE  
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Reflection – Second Sunday of Advent**

**5<sup>th</sup> December 2021**

*The Reverend Jamie Johnston, Chaplain*

On this second Sunday of Advent, our liturgy encourages us to focus on the prophets. The Lectionary offers us two, one from the Old Testament and one from the New – Baruch and John the Baptist.

The Book of Baruch is in the Apocrypha, the group of texts that didn't make it into the King James Bible but which are nonetheless used in our liturgy, including during Advent. The book is named after Baruch ben Neriah, scribe to the prophet Jeremiah. It's an extended reflection on that defining event in the history of ancient Israel, foundational to the writing of the Old Testament: the exile of the people to Babylon in the sixth century BCE.

The author of our reading from the Book of Baruch was writing in a context of communal despair. The kingdom of Judah, as its influence decreased, had become dependent on the empire of Babylon but sought help from Egypt. The attempt to play one power off against another failed, and the author found himself first being taken to Egypt and then among the exiles in Babylon. The people of Judah's identity and faith were both in crisis. It was into this sense of desolation that the prophet

spoke his words of encouragement: 'Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height; look towards the east'. You are going to be allowed home.

In Advent, we look back to the time of waiting described so poignantly in the Old Testament prophecies, with their metaphors of day dawning after a long night of waiting, of rivers flowing in the desert. John the Baptist is an ideal focus for looking at the prophetic tradition, as he takes up the mantle of Isaiah (to whom Luke expressly refers), as well as Amos, Hosea and Jeremiah. John baptises in the River Jordan, the boundary of the promised land which the Israelites had had to cross in order to enter into it. The Jordan also features prominently in the story of Elijah from the Second Book of Kings, in which the crossing of the river sanctifies Elisha as Elijah's successor.

John's message, as he 'proclaimed a baptism or repentance for the forgiveness of sins', was that everything the people had hoped for, the freedom and peace they had longed for, was about to arrive: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God'. That promise, he tells his hearers, with its words familiar from the ancient texts, is happening now.

It's a beautiful vision, and one which we should take to heart at the moment when it feels once again as though the northern hemisphere is standing on the brink of a wave of pandemic infection, as we prepare to enter a third year of uncertainty and separation. All that we see and hear on the news must be set against the narrative of a people looking for light in darkness – a vision of hope in the midst of turmoil.

We do well to hold onto that larger perspective, the perspective of which the prophets speak.

Our Gospel reading today, from St Luke's account, begins by listing who was in charge when 'the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness'. It, too, tells a story of communal despair, of a people living under the jackboot of an occupying army, the Roman Empire. One must never forget the political backdrop to the Gospels – Jesus's message was heard by a people living with their backs to the wall. When Herod the Great died, the Roman authorities took the decision to give each of his sons a region to rule, with Pilate retaining direct control of the most important region, Judea – a classic example of an imperial power seeking to divide and rule. So the wilderness in which John found himself was not only a harsh physical environment but also a metaphor for the desolation of Israel. Even though they had returned from captivity in Babylon, they were still not free. 'How long, O Lord, how long?' But by referring to the names of the emperor, the governor and the high priest, Luke emphasises that all temporal power is subject to the power of God, of which it takes a prophet – someone on the margins of society - to remind us.

There is also a sense of moral renewal in John's message, with its emphasis on cleansing, repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Wilderness experience does that to us too – none of us go looking for it, but so often it is in the wilderness that we experience transformation, renewal and reconciliation. There is an invitation in this story to reflect on those times and places in our lives which have felt like wilderness, and to see where and how God is present in them. For some, it's been part of the experience of this time of pandemic. It was in the wilderness that John

heard the word of God, and his response was a faithful one – a renewed attentiveness to the word of God in times of desolation, the sort of attentiveness that leads to transformation. John was rewarded with the hope that was coming into the world.

The Benedictus, which we read this morning, is the song John's father sings when he recovers his power of speech after his son is born. It is filled with the hope of dawning freedom, of light overcoming darkness, of a world where people will be able to live and serve God without fear any more, where there will be peace.

And so we find Luke's description of John the Baptist, pointing the way for the coming of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, picking up the image from the prophet Isaiah, which we also find in the passage from the Book of Baruch, of mountains being levelled, crooked ways being made straight and rough places made smooth. The Baptist's preaching announces the fulfilment of these promises, preparing his hearers for the arrival of the light, the light of Christ, of salvation for the whole world.

That is our hope, in these weeks of Advent. We are to wait for the light which shines in darkness and which the darkness has never, and will never, overcome. That is an antidote to the multiple crises affecting our world, just as it was for Judah and for Israel. A booster shot of hope, despite all that might otherwise seek to drag us down.

In his poem *O Emmanuel*, Malcolm Guite captures all that we wait for in this season of Advent, and that which is to come:

O come, O come, and be our God-with-us  
O long-sought With-ness for a world without,

O secret seed, O hidden spring of light.  
Come to us Wisdom, come unspoken Name  
Come Root, and Key, and King, and holy Flame,  
O quickened little wick so tightly curled,  
Be folded with us into time and place,  
Unfold for us the mystery of grace  
And make a womb of all this wounded world.  
O heart of heaven beating in the earth,  
O tiny hope within our hopelessness  
Come to be born, to bear us to our birth,  
To touch a dying world with new-made hands  
And make these rags of time our swaddling bands.

Amen.