

CUTTING EDGE CAMELOT, No 234

Sunday 10th December 2023

‘Virtually Church but with some way to go...’

Welcome

Welcome to Cutting Edge Camelot this Advent Sunday.

Scripture Passages

Isaiah 40: 1-11

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.

² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD’s hand
double for all her sins.

³ A voice cries out:
“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

⁵ Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

⁶ A voice says, “Cry out!”
And I said, “What shall I cry?”

All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.

⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.

⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand forever.

⁹ Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
“Here is your God!”

¹⁰ See, the Lord GOD comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.

¹¹ He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.

Mark 1: 1-8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

² As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
³ the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’ ”

⁴ John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸ I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Reflection

When John the Baptist announces his arrival on the spiritual landscape of his day, his impact is immediate and dramatic.

Based in the wilderness and preaching a tough, uncompromising message of a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, John finds that people come flocking to him. They come both from the surrounding countryside but also from Jerusalem, the chief city and spiritual centre of the Judaea of its day.

But why were people so eager to come to John? What drew them to him? After all, just as is the case today, people tend to gravitate towards cities and other centres of population and not away from them. Cities are the natural centres of prestige and power. They are the place to be for those who wish to make their mark on life or even just to find employment at all.

And again, the message of repentance that John was preaching was one designed to challenge rather than attract. If there had been the equivalent of a public relations firm in those days, I suspect that the advice to the budding young preacher would have been to find a different slogan if he was interested in drawing a crowd.

But John seems uninterested either in softening his message or the style of its delivery. His whole lifestyle was an ascetic one. Clothed with camel's hair and eating locusts and wild honey, he challenged both through his actions and through his words all those who chose an easier and more comfortable way of life.

And yet for all that, the crowds came and kept on coming. So, to begin to find an explanation for this, we need to remember that although John the Baptist is indeed associated with a message of baptism and repentance, his appearance in the wilderness needs to be placed within a larger context.

John came as a messenger to announce the coming of God. The very name of Advent, after all, reminds us that God is coming.

John is seen as a fulfilment of the prophecy in Isaiah which forms our first reading this morning. Isaiah places the prophetic voice crying out in the wilderness in a context of a message of powerful comfort and encouragement. This is a message of tenderness which proclaims to God's people that their sins have been forgiven and that their time of punishment and hardship is at an end.

And so, Isaiah's prophetic messenger points us forward to the ministry of John the Baptist. We are indeed confronted with the need to make some costly changes in our lives. A straight highway needs to be made in the wilderness if God is to come to His people. The ground needs to be levelled so that the rough places become a plain. This is a work that cannot be done without great effort and cost. However, the promised reward of God's coming can make this effort seem worth it.

Isaiah's prophecy announces God's coming, 'See, the Lord GOD comes with might.' And John the Baptist fulfils this prophecy through pointing to Jesus for whom he is the forerunner. However, the question which this leads us to is 'Are we ready for God's coming?'

In last week's Cutting Edge Camelot, Ron reminded us of how we will meet Jesus when we die. None of us knows the moment of our death so this leaves us with the challenge of living our lives as if we were going to meet Jesus here and now. And as we reflect on this truth, this may well bring to our attention aspects of our lives with which we are not comfortable and would like to change. As we look forward to meet Jesus we wish to do so with pure joy and gladness and not, partially at any rate, with shame and embarrassment.

So are there perhaps hidden and long standing grudges which we are hanging onto and which we need to release into God's hands so that we can experience the power of His forgiveness flowing freely in our lives? After all, this is something of what repentance means in practical terms and its effects are liberating. Repentance is, after all, a message that is both relevant and attractive for us when we think that God might come for us at any moment.

And the wilderness, too, can be an attractive place. Just as there are people who are drawn towards the excitement and glamour of a city to seek better opportunities for themselves so there are others whose journey takes them in the opposite direction.

I think, for instance, of stories of those people who, even if just for a time, have forsaken the pressures of a highly paid and prestigious job to spend some time in the silence and solitude of a monastery or a convent. This too can be a form of spiritual wilderness.

The stories that have emerged from such experiences have been ones of spiritual renewal where people recognise what truly matters in life and where their goals in life shift so that these now extend beyond the purely material.

One such person, a nonchurch goer, was accepted for four months to live in a convent. She said that there was something about living a selfless life that she found appealing. In the convent, she found one of the most challenging aspects to be the effects of silence on a spiritual level. This made her confront sides of herself that she didn't always want to see. Through that, she learnt a lot about herself and about humility and prayer. She did choose to leave the convent after four months in order to go back to her career of music and writing. However, she now realised that she was also called to serve God through this career just as much as through the silence and prayer of the convent. And so, when she left the convent, she felt content in her spiritual path.

And the Biblical message, too, is that the wilderness is a place of hope and new beginnings. As the people of God are led into the wilderness in their exodus from Egypt so a new chapter in their spiritual history begins. Similarly, in Hosea, the wilderness is seen as a place of spiritual renewal as God speaks to His people in these words of affirmation, I will allure her and bring her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her (Hosea, 2:14-15).

So as people we are drawn to live for a purpose and a hope that goes beyond ourselves. However, many people who might say that they were spiritual or interested in spiritual things can view such a purpose in a rather impersonal fashion. They may speak, for instance of spiritual or elemental forces. But is it possible to form a personal relationship with such abstract entities?

By contrast, the Christian hope is a personal one. At its centre is finding Jesus Christ as our guide and companion in life, a companionship which, through the power of Jesus' Resurrection, is stronger even than death.

John the Baptist speaks of Jesus baptising with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has been described as God's personal presence with us. Rather than believing that God is remote and distant from us, it is through the Holy

Spirit that we can experience God's closeness and as the One who is by our side in all experiences of life.

Isaiah's prophecy also emphasises the personal nature of God's presence and comfort. God is described in the familiar Biblical image of a shepherd who feeds His flock, gathers the lambs in his arms and gently leads the mother sheep.

So what do we make of John the Baptist's uncompromising message and also the attraction that, despite all this, it holds both for ourselves and other people? Perhaps one aspect of repentance is turning away from relying on ourselves and our own strength and turning to God in order to draw from God's strength every moment of our daily lives.

Isaiah vividly draws this contrast in the following way. He speaks of our efforts at constancy and faithfulness as being as fragile and transient as the grass or the flower of the field. For the grass inevitably withers and the flower fades. And our experience bears this truth out. We find that our own best efforts at faithfulness inevitably give out at some point or other.

By contrast, however if we find our refuge and source of strength not in ourselves and our own efforts but in God's unchanging faithfulness, we will find true security and stability. For, God's life is eternal and everlasting, 'the word of our God will stand forever'.

Where is the source of our strength? Do we turn to God or do we rely on ourselves? The message of Advent is one of the need to turn to God in the light of the joy of the coming of God through his Son Jesus Christ.

Tristram

Points for Prayers

- Turning to Jesus and to God to find our source of strength and help
- Preparations for Christmas and the people we will meet over this season
- For Israel, Gaza and the Middle East
- Ongoing war in the Ukraine
- Continuing storms
- Those whom we know who are facing illnesses of all kinds and have recently been bereaved
- For Elliscombe House in Higher Holton and its residents
- For teachers and children of North Cadbury church school as they continue to celebrate Christmas and prepare for the end of term

Hymn

Another Advent hymn is 'On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry.'

Services for this week and next

Sunday 10 th December	9.30 am Communion, Galhampton
Sunday 10 th December	9.30 am Communion, North Cheriton
Sunday 10 th December	9.30 am Matins, Blackford
Sunday 10 th December	11.00 am Patronal Sunday Worship, Holton
Sunday 10 th December	4.00 pm Carol Service, South Cadbury
Saturday 16 th December	6.00 pm, Camelot Carol Service, North Cadbury
Sunday 17 th December	9.30 am Communion, Compton Pauncefoot
Sunday 17 th December	11.00 am Sunday Worship, North Cadbury

Sunday 17 th December	11.00 am Advent Family Service, Maperton
Sunday 17 th December	4.30 pm Crib and Carol Service, Holton

Excalibur

Excalibur is back in paper form. It contains details of Camelot people, a record of baptisms, weddings and funerals undertaken through the church in the Camelot Parishes. The December and January edition of Excalibur has now been published online at camelotparishes.co.uk.

The Parish Office

If Rob is not in the Office during normal office hours please contact him via email (office@camelotparishes.org.uk) or on 01749 850934.

Growing as a worshipper, a servant and a family

*We pray that 'we might live in love,
as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us'*

(Ephesians 5: 2)