

Holy Trinity Headington Quarry 9/12/07 10.00am
Advent 2
Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

It's me again this week. Clearly our observance of Advent this year is mirroring the season, so that we're saving the best until last! The second Sunday of Advent is when we focus on the role of the prophets in preparing the way of Christ – and today's readings offer us both John the Baptist and Isaiah as models.

Prophets are strange people. We don't often read about some of the things that they get up to in the Hebrew Scriptures, because they are so bizarre. But what they do show us is that prophecy is not just about words; it's also about action. Ancient prophets often acted out, rather than spoke, the message they were charged to deliver to God's people. Hosea, for instance, marries a whore, in order to personify God's relationship with faithless Israel. Then he calls his children by remarkable names: one is Lo-ruhamah, meaning "No pity", to show that God will no longer have pity on Israel, while the next is called Lo-ammi, meaning "Not my people". Isaiah does the same thing: no-one names their son Mahershalalhashbaz without a good reason. (It means "speeding for spoil, hastening for plunder" and embodies the forthcoming defeat of Israel by foreign armies.) Or there's Zedekiah in the first book of Kings, who makes himself a pair of iron horns and goes charging about to put the king in a bullish mood for battle.

John the Baptist is no exception. He comes across as something of a wild man, living in the wilderness, wearing clothes of camel's hair and eating locusts and wild honey. But rather than focus on prophets as being people on the margins (which is one way of approaching these readings), let's notice how John's prophecy is linked to action. He doesn't just preach the message, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand." He shows people what to do, physically washing them in the waters of the Jordan to symbolise the cleansing they have to undergo. "I baptise you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me ... He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

We might be tempted to think of our worship as a form of words, all written in the order of service. But actually, the most significant parts involve action, which is part of the emphasis in this special liturgy we are following for Advent. We start off at the font, recalling our own washing in baptism and forgiveness of sins. (I don't want to give Tim ideas, but some churches actually sprinkle the congregation with water at this point.) We light the Advent candle, to symbolise the light coming into the world. We gather to hear the Word of God – and the reason the Gospel procession comes down into the middle of the Church is to show how Jesus, the Word of God, is in the midst of us. If only we had more space, we could all then come up and stand around the altar: when I was training at Mirfield, we used to make a big circle for the Eucharistic prayer, reminding ourselves that we were all participating in the celebration and not just leaving it to the person saying the words and waving their hands about on our behalf. At any rate, we do gather at the altar here to receive communion, and sharing the bread and wine is an action which says more about our unity in Christ than any number of words.

The definition of a sacrament offered by St Augustine is that it results from a word being joined to an element. So we pray over the water to make it holy for baptism. We pray over the bread and wine to make them holy for our communion. And in the same way, the prophets join words with actions to speak to us of God, becoming sacraments in themselves, in a way. Recall what God says in Isaiah 55: the “word that goes out from my mouth ... shall not return to me empty, but ... shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” Even in the Hebrew Scriptures, before we start talking about Jesus as the Word of God, God's word is characterised as something which is active, effective, transformative.

And this is what the prophets bear witness to. They don't make predictions, which may or may not come true (even though that's what our modern understanding of prophecy largely comprises). They show how God's word transforms lives, starting with their own. And it's often this that really challenges

people. It must have been difficult for Hosea's contemporaries to live alongside him without questioning what it meant. Jeremiah's lamentations so enraged the leaders of the time that they threw him into a cistern. And we heard how the Pharisees and Sadducees came out to see what John the Baptist was doing (not that he was very polite in return, although no doubt there was a reason for what he said).

So how do we challenge people? How do our lifestyles speak of God? Coming to church can in itself be counter-cultural. Do you find that other people become embarrassed or start defending themselves if you mention that you go to church? Our commitment to being an eco-church sends out an important message, just like making an effort to recycle and conserve resources at home. Even the way we relate to people in the street or on the phone could prompt them to ask questions about why we do this. And we don't do it just to get a reaction, as a rather heavy-handed type of mission activity. We do it because this is the way of life which we believe that God calls us to, and to deviate from this would be to deviate from God.

So we can challenge. But we can also be challenged. Anyone whose way of life forces us to think about how we live our own is a prophet. They might be in this congregation, or in the wider church; they do exist. Or they might have nothing to do with the Christian faith and yet still have a message which is of God. And we are challenged by the words of the prophets and the texts of the Bible we read. Can we bring ourselves to trust in the utopian vision of Isaiah, and not be afraid of coming together with those who may harm us? Does our baptism lead us to true repentance rather than being some form of spiritual insurance policy? Following God is not about words, but about action, and the prophets are the first not just to tell us, but to show us. Let us too bear fruit worthy of repentance in order to prepare the way of the Lord. **Amen.**