

It seems that in this pandemic, we're always waiting. This time last year, we were waiting for the vaccines to arrive, having just heard news that seemed too good to be true about their effectiveness. This year, we're waiting to see if they'll still work as well against the Omicron variant. Waiting can sometimes be a nerve-grinding, exhausting, process, most of all when we wait poised between utter despair and relief. Let us be honest – the Second Sunday of Advent in 2021 involves just this kind of joy-sapping, emotionally fraught, waiting.

Waiting is, however, part of the human condition. It is also a major theme of the season of Advent, where we wait for Christ to come into the world at Christmas. Even Jesus had to wait for the appropriate time to start his public ministry, which meant waiting for John the Baptist; and John himself presumably had to wait for the right moment to begin preaching, in a time and a place that was full of shifting political and religious tensions.

It is of note that Luke locates John the Baptist at a definite historical moment. His preaching didn't happen at a random moment in history, but at a particular time and a particular place, and I quote from this morning's Gospel:

“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas.”

From the time when he is writing, Luke is probably looking back around sixty years to the ministry of John the Baptist. That is a long time, but well within the living memory of older people; prominent public figures of the time will still mean something to most people. John the Baptist's ministry is presented as a historical reality, in the not too distant past. It is as if a modern writer were writing about, say the Cuban Missile Crisis or miniskirts, by saying:

“In the eighth year of the reign of Elizabeth the Second, when Macmillan was Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Kennedy President of the United States, and Khrushchev and Mao Chairmen of the Communist Parties of the Soviet Union and China, during the archiepiscopates of Geoffrey Fisher and Michael Ramsey.”

Now, it wouldn't be unusual for writer of historical fiction to start their story by conjuring up a period in the past in just this way. But there is another reason why I take this as a serious effort to describe real events. It is this: if someone wanted to create a fictional character who was a reliable witness, they probably wouldn't create John the Baptist, who dressed like a madman, and lived in the wilderness eating insects and honey he scooped from wild beehives. Not the sort of person who is exactly a barrister's dream of reliable witness in court. Nor was he the sort of person who was considered a respectable figure in either the Graeco-Roman or Jewish societies of Luke's day. He wasn't a citizen of Rome, as St Paul occasionally liked to remind other people that he was; nor is there any record of him being a great learned reader of the Scriptures. Instead, he was a rather severe and even frightening figure.

Another reason why I take this account seriously as at least a genuine attempt to record events fairly is the nature of the offer that John makes his hearers: the forgiveness of sins in return for a baptism of repentance. He isn't promising any material reward to his hearers, although many of them must have been desperately poor. This isn't the message of, let's say, today's televangelists, promising riches to his viewers in the morning if only they'll send in some money today. The Baptist's message wouldn't be the sort of thing that would interest a fake news Facebook page.

This morning's Gospel reading also seeks to connect history to prophecy: it quotes the famous passage from Isaiah, the one that speaks of one crying out in the wilderness and every valley being filled. Indeed, the introduction to John the Baptist in all four Gospels refers to this same passage, which comes from Chapter 40 of Isaiah, the beginning of so-called Second Isaiah.

This part of Isaiah was written decades into the exile in Babylon, when many of the exiles had given up hope of returning to Jerusalem, and yet their liberation was just around the corner, albeit in a different way than they had imagined, not as a proud and sovereign kingdom but as a quiet and well-treated backwater of the mighty Persian Empire. It was reprised by John the Baptist during another period of despair, when again many dreamed of national greatness, but were liberated instead by something stranger but much greater, God made human in the person of Jesus Christ.

Does this passage, and the story of John the Baptist that introduces it, speak to our current time of despair? I think it does in three ways.

Firstly, waiting can be terrible, and we live in a terrible time of waiting. Please don't feel inadequate if you find this time of pandemic a tremendous psychological ordeal. It certainly is for me. It can seem hopeless, that we will never have a future without the fear, the masks, and the endless tests. But God is working his purposes out, in the world today, in ways that we don't see, although we maybe could see if we looked closely enough. We don't because God often works his purposes out through people regarded as inferior or unreliable, in places the wider world is not interested in. There is always good news: often not visible to most of us until it has already changed things for the better, but be of no doubt that in many places in the world today things are happening that will, when you finally hear of them, renew your hope and your confidence.

Secondly, forgiveness of sins is good news in the world we live in. All of a sudden, we seem to have become a society built on self-righteousness and pride, where we join ourselves into tribes, often political tribes, where dissent is regarded as disloyalty and where seeing the humanity of those who disagree with us is regarded as weakness. Perhaps it is because so many of us live so much of our lives on social media – certainly including me – where we're always in 'public' and where a throwaway line can exist electronically forever. This is the persecuting world where social media posts from long in the past are dragged up to destroy people's present, and the people doing it consider themselves righteous crusaders for justice or for national honour.

God wants to forgive our sins, and the way to receive this is to repent – a loaded word, but one that simply means to turn around – so the way to receive forgiveness of our sins is to stop doing them and do the opposite. In today's world, the idea that to live like God is to treat each moment as a chance to free people from the mistakes of their past is good news indeed. It is the very opposite of the too-good-to-be-true fake news we are confronted with every day. It might even change the world.

Thirdly, try not to get too worked up about the standards of the world. I think we all know that sometimes the most valuable diamonds are the roughest ones, while some very polished gems turn out to be fake. Similarly, dismissing people because we think they're too grand can lead to some major misjudgements of character. How people dress, how people speak, the newspaper they read – these are all very poor clues as to the content of their character. Indeed, if we want to encounter surprisingly good news, and I think we would all like to do that more often, then that almost certainly depends on getting to know people who aren't like we are ourselves.

To turn away from the wrong we have done, to embrace others in full acknowledgement that they too have done wrong, to never lose hope that things will get better, probably from the most unlikely of sources, possibly from people we don't see eye-to-eye with on much. That is a message of hope across history, from the times Isaiah and the Babylonians, to the times of John the Baptist and Luke, to the times of Facebook and COVID19.

Now to the only wise God our saviour, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.