Advent 3 2020 Sermon,

Some of the final words from today’s Gospel:

John 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. I have baptised you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’

I would like you to keep these words in your mind throughout the sermon, as I will be attempting to bring together a number of inter-related thoughts – some will say I’m just rambling, but I’m willing to take the risk.

As I think many of you are aware, I believe in prayerfulness. That state of trying to be in touch with God throughout our waking hours. That state of trying to commit each waking moment into God’s hands, as well as listening for what God is saying to us. I have to admit that my listening skills still need quite a lot of honing! That state of trying to reflect on the things of God at the same time as trying to act in God’s name day by day. It doesn’t negate the need for special prayers for people or events at particular times. Rather, it provides a framework within which such special prayers can sit.

The recent times of lockdown have forced us to be more passive than we might ideally wish to be. It has, however, given us more time to reflect on how we have acted in God’s name in the past. In particular I have thought of the times when the Holy Spirit has been able to work through my ministry to help people in need. I have also become aware again of the times when my ministry has fallen short of that which God requires.

In this Advent season I have thoughtfully recollected memories of Advents past. This year we broke with tradition and started putting up the lights on Advent Sunday – to bring light and cheer to the dark days we have had recently. It made me think of two memories of more than fifty years ago.

The first comes from my childhood in the 1950s. On this third Sunday of Advent a bare Christmas tree appeared in church (no decorations until just before Christmas). Children and adults were encouraged to wrap toys and place them under the tree to go to children less fortunate than ourselves. In the week following, these were taken to the local Church of England Children’s Society orphanage between Salisbury and Shaftesbury. A task my parents and I performed after my mother became the Children’s Society’s local secretary in the parish. It feels like a mirror image of what the people of Hanwood are doing today for children in the Shrewsbury area. With the local food bank expecting to have to help over 200 families and individuals this year, it is a task never more needed.

The second comes from the time of my Curacy (1st ‘posting’) in Auckland in County Durham. At that time the themes in the calendar to be observed on the four Sundays of Advent were Death, Judgement, Hell and Heaven. Grim topics for the darkest days of the year! Only the last offered real hope of preaching in a more joyful way. My Vicar made it more dismal by not allowing any decoration for Christmas to take place until after the 4th Sunday of Advent. When Christmas day was at the end of the week this presented little problem. When Christmas day was a Monday it sent the ladies decorating the church into a ‘flat spin’. They had to do it between the end of Evensong at 7.00pm and the beginning of Midnight Communion at 11.30pm! He also didn’t allow any carols to be sung before Christmas – the annual carol service came after the festival.

Over the last fifty years the church has developed its thinking somewhat. Rather than Advent being thought of as only about preparation for eternity, it is now recognised as also a preparation to remembering Jesus’ arrival in Bethlehem. The balance we need to strike is about ‘looking forward in two timescales’. By looking at those who came before Jesus – the Patriarchs – the Prophets – John the Baptist – and Mary – we prepare the way of the Lord, to quote Isaiah and Mark. We get ourselves into the frame of mind to welcome the birth of our Saviour at Christmas. But, we need to temper that with a sense of recognising of ourselves within the context of eternity. Jesus is both the babe of Bethlehem **and** Christ the King in glory.

This ‘couplet’ needs to be the hallmark of our ministry in the present. Just as Jesus was ‘on’ earth and ‘of’ heaven, our ministry needs to be on earth to encourage others towards heaven. We need to think of the gift of Jesus at Bethlehem as the greatest gift ever given. The gift of God to humanity that keeps on giving. Think of each gift we give this Christmas, whether small or large, as an outward and visible sign of God’s gift of his very essence for all of us.

John the Baptist came preaching repentance, urging a change of mind and heart in his hearers. John came baptizing with water. But he recognised he was the fore-runner – the one who came before the one who was greater. Quoting Isaiah he referred to himself as one crying in the wilderness. “Make straight the way of the Lord”.

John stood in the tradition of the Messianic community of which Isaiah spoke in our first reading. A community which stood for God’s rule of righteousness and justice, to:

        bring good news to the oppressed

        bind up the broken-hearted,

proclaim liberty to the captives

release to the prisoners

proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour

These are words of prophecy which need to be heard in this country in our generation. The lives and livelihoods of some of the poorest in our society are being sacrificed to ideology and dogmatism. A sense of compassion and charity have been the losers. But since the pandemic there have been signs that these are fighting back against the odds. Major Tom Moore in the spring was followed by numerous individuals doing things for those in need. Most recently, Kevin Sinfield running marathons for his friend Rob Burrow and to promote the needs of those with Motor Neurone Disease. All have provoked a generosity in others.

We, in the churches, need to respond with generosity to the great love shown to us by God by giving his Son to be one of us, and to show us the way to eternity. His humanity has made the possibility of our eternity into a reality. At the same time we also need to respond to that love by being generous towards all, especially those most in need. Generosity isn’t just for Christmas – it is our calling throughout the year. And there is a ‘sting in the tail’ – that generosity should stretch to us speaking out prophetically when we see politicians and others acting in their own interest rather than for the most deprived in our communities – whether we are hated for it, or not.

Graham Earney