

## Getting Across – Advent 3 2013

Isaiah 35 vv 1-10 p719, Psalm 146, James 5 vv 7-10 p1216, Matthew 11 vv 2-19 p976

If only we could have heard John the Baptist preach! Just imagine. Down there by the River Jordan, thousands and thousands of people all gathered to hear this holy man address the crowds. *Repent ye, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand. The kingdom of Heaven is at hand!* What a message! The excitement, the sense of anticipation. Not an easy message for some: *O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?* Nevertheless it says: *Then went out to him Jerusalem, all Judaea, and all the region about Jordan, And were baptised of him in Jordan, confessing their sins.* Imagine being there and experiencing that.

But it turns out that John is just the warm up act. Then comes Jesus to preach the same message: *Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.* If you had followed Jesus, you would have seen the miracles, the signs of the Kingdom, *The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up* - just as Isaiah had prophesied all those centuries before. Imagine hearing Jesus preach. *The poor have the gospel preached to them!*

If only we had preachers like John and Jesus in our churches today! In our churches or on our street corners? Whatever! If only we had preachers like John and Jesus today. Everybody would believe. Everybody would instantly repent of his or her sins. Church buildings would be packed with joyful worshippers every Sunday and throughout the week. People would be falling over themselves to donate their time, money and talents in the service of the greater good. Nobody would go hungry because the world's resources would be shared out fairly. There would be no war or crime. Business would be conducted according to the highest ethical principles. So would government. Every child would receive a good education. The sick would invariably receive the best available care. Nobody would need to be lonely or homeless because nobody would be unloved. The kingdoms of this world would truly become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ. If only we had preachers like John and Jesus today.

But what happened? John lived in the desert as a holy man. He ate sparingly of the food he could find in the desert, locusts and wild honey, and dressed in camel's hair and skins. So he must have been some kind of a nutter and nobody should take him seriously. Well actually, according to today's Gospel, the people said, *he hath a devil*, but it amounts to the same thing.

Then came Jesus, on the other hand. Now He enjoyed His food and drink. He liked going to parties. He mixed with everybody. Not a bit like John! So, obviously, the people who thought John was a bit odd for not mixing and enjoying a normal life would listen to Jesus. After all, He was one of them, a friend to everyone – someone you have a pie and a pint with and a chat. Not a bit of it. *Behold a man gluttonous, and a wine bibber, a friend of publicans and sinners.* You couldn't take someone like that seriously. He was far too ordinary. Nothing holy about Him.

We kind of accept that the reason people are not Christians is because we don't put over the Gospel in a way that suits them. There is a kind of a feeling around that if only we could

find the magic formula, the right blend of ancient and modern, the best time to meet, the correct location, well-ordered church buildings, trendy or traditional clergy...Take your pick. There are plenty of nostrums around. Some of them seem to work better than others. Some work better than others in some situations. So you can point to apparent success stories almost anywhere on the ecclesiastical spectrum, from low to high, conservative to liberal, traditional to post-modern. But if there is a magic formula, the churches in England certainly have not found it. Whatever we do, the majority of English people are indifferent to the Christian religion and some are actively hostile.

That is not to say that we should stop trying to find ways to put over God's Word in a manner that people will understand and respond to. The Old Testament prophets used some remarkable visual aids. One of Jeremiah's better known aids was the potter's wheel. See how the potter shapes the clay and how he discards the pots that don't turn out right. Well that's how God deals with nations and people. In a less well known example of a visual aid, Jeremiah takes his dirty underwear and buries it. After some time he digs it up and shows it to the people as a demonstration of what corruption leads to. There are many examples in the bible of imaginative ways of presenting the message – visual aids, signs, demonstrations. We shouldn't stop looking for new ways to present the Gospel which make people take notice.

However, that is only part of the lesson of the prophets and maybe the less significant part. The last verse of our lesson from James today is, *Take, my brethren, the prophets, who have spoken in the name of the Lord, for an example of suffering affliction, and of patience.* Despite all the effort they put into preaching, despite the imaginative presentations and visual aids, despite signs and wonders even, by and large the majority of the people did not listen to the prophets. They refused to hear the Word of God. At the time of today's Gospel reading John the Baptist was in prison and later he would be beheaded. Jesus would be crucified. In Revelation Jesus is described as the faithful witness. The Greek word for witness is martyr. So often faithful witness is proved to be inseparable from martyrdom. I was tempted by a pun. The title of today's sermon is *Getting Across*, by which I meant getting the message across, getting God's Word to God's people in such a way that they receive it into their hearts. But perhaps it should be *Getting A Cross*, in the sense of taking up our cross to follow Him. Self-sacrificial love is the best witness there is and even that by no means guarantees a hearing. Jesus says to His Church, *The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also.* (John 15<sup>20</sup>). If we take up our cross and follow Jesus, we can expect pretty much the same response as He got. If we don't follow Jesus, in what sense are we Christians? Jesus is the Word. We cannot alter the Word which we preach in order to make it more acceptable. We ought always to be looking for better ways to present the Word, but we can't change the Word. *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*

So why do people refuse the Word? Why do people reject God? We can't speak for other people, only for ourselves. Why might we be reluctant to receive the Word of God? If we knew that we might be able to understand other people and be better equipped to reach them, to get a cross. *Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*