SERMON ADVENT 2C 2020

Last Sunday I spoke about the end being our beginning as we focused on the end times at then end of Luke's Gospel as our first reading for the liturgical year. This Sunday we go right to the beginning of Mark's Gospel chapter, but this time we reflect on the beginning being the end. The end of an era of imperial fear and imperial rule that John the Baptist comes to confront.

Each Gospel starts with its own particular setting. Mark is straight into things. Matthew details Jesus lineage back to David, John starts with the mysterious and poignant image of the Word as God.

For Luke, he has a litany of imperial, regional, and religious authorities that does more than just date John's ministry. It wants to tell us something about these human kingdoms and their relationship with the Kingdom of God. We have the Roman Emporer, Tiberius, Pontius Pilate the governor of Judea, and Herod ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip. Those first two leaders represent the power and oppression of Rome, the occupying foreigner. The last two, Herod and Philip, the local rulers who are in collaboration with the Roman's in exchange for wealth and power.

Luke is straight away giving us a window into the political and social situation to which John the Baptist exercised his ministry. It was clearly a time of oppression from foreign powers, and corruption by local powers. This would have led to a climate of fear and anger as the people of Israel were exploited by their colonial rulers and longed for God's salvation.

It is sad to say.

It seems not much has changed.

Yes, perhaps the rulers are different, and the borders have moved, but the same oppression continues. From the illegal occupation by Israel in the West Bank, to the movement of ISIS into northern Iraq and Syria. To the US occupation of Iraq. The same story of power and oppression continues, giving rise to the same fear and anger that has been expressed for centuries. The same search for salvation also continues, most often found in the waging of war in the name of God, an attempt to establish an earthly Kingdom that will bring about God's return as judge and messiah.

But this is not the path to salvation that we hear being preached by John the Baptist. That is not a call to arms or a call to retribution, but a call to turn away from these things

and to turn to peace. This is what John is doing when he came 'proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins'. This repentance, this 'turning away' was firstly a call to the individual. It was a call for all people to be baptised, to turn away from those things that destroy life to the things that give life. John's call was for everyone to acknowledge that we do not always get things right, that we do not always show compassion or seek justice. This was John's message. For he knew that all those things that came as a consequence of Foreign occupation and oppression, things such as fear, anger and the desire for revenge in fact enslave us. Salvation therefore was something that begins in each individual human heart.

That is why there was no call to arms to throw out the Roman occupiers, but a call to self-reflection, a call to self-transformation. Only then, when the individual heart has acknowledged its own weaknesses can it truly be ready to challenge those things that are unjust, those things that oppress.

But as we know, this is not an easy task. If we just look at our modern times and in particular the Middle East. The West now has itself so entangled in the situation it truly seems like there is no way out. We may say that the power of love and peace are no match for the power of war and retribution, especially in the face of a group such as ISIS. Whatever your opinion on the escalating war, one thing is clear; the military action underway will not alone end the violence that is currently gripping the world.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, said a few years ago that the "Just War" criteria has been met to justify military action against ISIS in Syria; but warned that merely bombing their targets would "confirm their dreadful belief that what they are doing is the will of God." He called for a holistic approach to tackling ISIS, which should include a "global theological component".

He imagines this global theological component as "essential to defeat ISIS and other extremist narratives" and called for a global theological and ideological component – not just one in this country – to what we are doing.

He goes on to say it must be one which "is relentlessly pursued and promoted; and it must include challenging Saudi Arabia and Qatar, whose own promotion of a particular brand of Islamic theology has provided a source from which ISIS have drawn a false legitimisation."It must also show clear support for global mainstream Muslim and other religious leaders."

Finally he said that "This must also be supported by greater generosity in hospitality to refugees. But hospitality must be accompanied by a clear strategy that reduces the need for others to seek sanctuary and enables those who have fled to return."

Justin Welby's words are in a sense a call to 'repentance'. A repentance that calls us to be self-reflective, acknowledging that we may have contributed to the problems we now face. This a call to repentance from war and retribution to compassion and peace, and a willingness to understand those who are different to ourselves. This is in itself what John the Baptist was doing. He was preparing the path to salvation, the coming of Christ. The one who makes the crooked straight, and the rough ways smooth so that *all* flesh shall see the salvation of God.

Therefore, it is also our task, just as it was John the Baptists, to proclaim this message of salvation and reconciliation. For God calls us to be proclaimers – not the powerful or the privileged, but ordinary people, people's whose hearts are turned to God, willing to prepare the coming Advent of the Christ, the prince of peace, who calls us too to be peacemakers. May you know God's love, his call and his peace this Advent.

Amen