

SERMON FOR 3rd SUNDAY IN ADVENT 2020
ALL SAINTS CHURCH, BIRKENHEAD
Rev Jordan Greatbatch

There has been a lot of talk about homelessness in the past few years. We are told that homelessness is on the rise in our major cities. There doesn't seem to be any overall policy to deal with homelessness. There is a sense that we will always have the homeless with us. The reasons for this are varied and complicated, but we are told that some choose to live on the streets. I wonder if you have ever had a conversation with such people? Some you will find can be quite smart and erudite. Often appearances are hard to get past. For these people are often dirty, living on the edge of society, looked poorly dressed. It is a rather unpleasant description of a person, but strangely it fits the character in our Gospel today, John the Baptist. He often confronted people with their own particular foibles, and he was not afraid to speak out about the social ills of his day. There are lots

of similarities between our homeless and John the Baptist.

As there are about many different characters who we often perceive as odd or socially awkward. In essence the prophets, of which John the Baptist was, are often unpopular, unsuccessful and even ignored. We see this throughout history with the many forgotten Geniuses', or those who only gained recognition once they had died.

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I suppose it's just these sorts of characters that challenge our notions of success and what makes a worthy life. These sorts of people have stark contrasts in their lives. Take Albert Einstein for example, it was said that on the day he died, Time photographer Ralph Morse eschewed the crowds of reporters and other photojournalists gathered at Princeton Hospital, and instead found his way to Einstein's office at the Institute of Advanced Studies.

He snapped a single picture of the legacy of the world's greatest mind.

What that picture showed is chaos. Not an inch of Einstein's desk is free of paper. Books, manuscripts, magazines, and envelopes are everywhere (along with what looks like a cookie jar). The same goes for the shelves. One shelf holds neatly arrayed journals, but elsewhere are piles and piles of papers.

It's a mess, and he liked it that way. When asked about his messy desk, Einstein remarked "If a cluttered desk is a sign of a cluttered mind, then what are we to think of an empty desk?" It is this sort of contrast which attracts our attention.

As do the contrasts of John the Baptist's life and message. He challenged people to think more than skin deep. He challenged even the religious leaders who saw themselves as above reproach. It

it these sorts of prophets that we would be wise to listen to, despite how we may judge their looks and lifestyle.

John's message was to repent. Unfortunately the word repent is out of fashion. Perhaps from years of firestorm preaches banging their bibles shouting at people to repent. But repentance is in fact a more nuanced and meaningful word than its mainstream definition. In Biblical Hebrew, the idea of repentance is represented by two verbs: **בוש** shuv (to return) and **נחם** nacham (to feel sorrow). Repentance simply means to return in sorrow to that which brings life. What John wanted was for people to return from the things which spoilt their life and face God once again. The sign of that repentance was twofold. Baptism was an outward sign, and so was amendment of life. Those two things baptism and amendment of life went together.

When John was in prison he began to doubt his own mission. He sent word to Jesus to ask if he was really the Messiah. Jesus answer was simply, look around and see what is happening. The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed the deaf hear, and so on. In other words there are signs of the realm of God all around you. Look for those signs.

This was a great contrast to John's mission. He was expecting people to change their behavior. Jesus, however, was expecting people to see God in their midst. And when they saw God then they would change. This is a huge contrast between these two men. They were as we say like chalk and cheese. And I have said it before but I think it is a good reminder of how different John and Jesus were. We often have this idea of Jesus being pious all the time, but rather the contrary is true. He spent time with the outsiders and the troubled.

For John was of the old order. Jesus was bringing in something new.

John sang a funeral hymn, Jesus an alleluia.

John refused to eat bread, only locusts and wild honey, while Jesus broke his bread to share.

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John refused to drink wine, but Jesus changed all the water in the kitchen into wine.

John dressed in camel skin, Jesus in a custom tailored robe, woven in one piece without a seam. John warned the people of the wrath to come, Jesus invited the people to align themselves with the new Kingdom.

The huge contrast between these two men more clearly shows the great change Jesus brought. He looked forward with hope to a new life where the wrongs of the world would be put right. His method of bringing about that change was

different from the past, it was about pointing to the signs of God among us.

And so we need to take time to look for those signs. Sometimes it's in the contrasts that we see the presence of God. Sometimes the prophets are the ones we least expect, or are the ones that society shuns. God works in mysterious ways after all.

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As we all move into a future different from the past, especially in this year of COVID so we are encouraged ourselves to be signs of the realm of God in our midst. We are the ones who are to provide the contrasts in life. Our lives will be seen as different in that we live in the realm of God. It is not all about the clothes we wear or the titles in front of our name, it is rather how we treat people that matters. Our lives will show that we place our trust in God. How we behave to our fellow human

beings will be our chance to show signs of God's presence among us. This presence of God we experience here in bread and wine, a presence of God experienced in our dealings one with another, a presence of God seen in the contrasts of our world. And like John, we seek to prepare for the final coming of our Lord when the contrasts will be made one in God.