

Sermon for Advent 2, 2018, St Andrew's Chesterton (Isaiah 64. 1-12; Luke 3: 1-6)

On this Second Sunday of Advent we are introduced to John the Baptist, one of the most striking characters in the New Testament. St Luke tells of his conception and birth, announced by the Angel Gabriel to his parents, the elderly Elizabeth and Zechariah. Now after long years in obscurity - a kind of extended retreat in the desert - John steps out on the stage of Israel's history. It is the beginning of a journey that will bring him into conflict with Herod and lead eventually to imprisonment and a martyr's death.

The way St Luke introduces him is significant: "...the word of God came to John." For Luke, John is the last great prophet of the first covenant, which God had made with his people Israel. According to Luke, in Jesus - whose imminent appearance John is sent to announce - all the promises of God to Israel are brought to fulfilment. Jesus had been proclaimed at his Presentation in the Temple as "...the light to enlighten the Gentiles and the glory of his people Israel."

Therefore, to reveal his appearance, the word of God comes to John, just as it came to the great prophets before him - to Isaiah, from whom we have heard so much this year, to Jeremiah and Hosea, and to a host of others, all those whom God had called to announce his word.

Yet of them all John the Baptist was the last and greatest. To him it was given to make known the ultimate appearance of the Word. Up to and including John, the word of God had *come* to the prophets. But in Jesus Christ, the Word and Son of God *himself* came in person. He *is* the very Word of God, become flesh. Hence St Augustine could say, echoing Isaiah, that while John was the voice crying in the

wilderness, Jesus is the Word that that voice proclaimed; and while John was a lamp alight and shining, Jesus is the True Light that lightens all who come into this world. That is also why Jesus declared that up to his time, of man born of woman, there had never yet been anyone greater than John. He was specially chosen from his mother's womb and set apart to witness to the Word.

But the way in which St Luke locates John in space and time is also telling. The drama begins in the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor, Herod and Philip in power, and Annas and Caiaphas serving as high priests. They were all real people, attested to by history. That historical reality is a vital key to understanding the nature of Christianity. Our faith is not based on mythology! Mythological events take place in a wonderful world outside time - that is why fairy tales traditionally start with "once upon a time."

But the coming of Jesus Christ is no fairy tale and no mere myth, however splendid or inspiring! It is the power of God appearing in time and space for our salvation. The drama of Christ took place in real time and real space – in an obscure but significant part of the Roman world, with real participants whose existence is recorded also by secular historians. Why is that so important?

One sometimes hears the Christian faith described as "timeless" – involving "timeless truths" that Jesus is said to have taught, or "timeless wisdom." Often too one gets the impression that having a "spiritual life" is like having some kind of disembodied "ghostly" one, as if the purpose of faith were to detach us from real time and space and link us up with something eternal and unchanging. Hence the proliferation of meditation classes, mindfulness courses and other concentration techniques usually dependent on borrowed Far-

Eastern philosophies. You can often see advertisements for such things stuck on the railings of Great St Mary's Church. Much of that has value, especially in calming people down in today's frenetic world, but it can also create the false impression that having a "spiritual life" means "stepping out of time."

But the way of Jesus Christ is very different. When he came down from heaven he did the exact opposite – he stepped out of eternity and into time, into real time and real space. He stepped specifically into the dangerous world of 1st century Palestine, with all its brutal social and political complications. Nor did he enlighten us by teaching beautiful ideas or demonstrating methods of meditation. Jesus did not get enlightenment by sitting under a tree – rather, he brought us enlightenment by dying on one! He saved us by his death and resurrection, and calls us to have faith in him. That is the light of the world – the absolute love revealed in his dying to take away our sins and his rising to glory so as to give us new and indestructible life.

Jesus is not the last and greatest of the prophets – that was his forerunner John. We have had many prophets, wise men and gurus and we don't really need another one. We need what God has given us: "...the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." In Jesus Christ, both Son of God and a real human being like us, we got him...

Of course it might seem that he did step back out of time and return to his Father at the Ascension - yet that was not to abandon us but to be our hope. He has gone home to the place to which he calls us. And, after his Ascension Jesus is not *less* present to us than he was in Palestine - actually through the coming of the Holy Spirit and in Holy Communion he is *more* present with us than he was there, though

we do not see him visibly. He even comes to dwell in us as we eat and drink his sacramental gifts at the Eucharist.

This concrete historical specificity of Jesus is what theologians call “the scandal of particularity”. It’s a scandal because it’s a stumbling block to every spirituality teaching disembodiment. In a real person, with a real history - Jesus of Nazareth, the Lord’s anointed – we meet the fullness of God. If we want a real relationship with God – one that will carry us into eternal life – then we have to trust in Christ and shape our lives by his Gospel. God can of course also save people who have never heard of Jesus because the initiative is his: wherever love is working in peoples’ lives then Jesus and the Holy Spirit are secretly working there too. But the normal way of salvation since John appeared in the wilderness is through the one to whom he witnessed: Jesus Christ the Son of God, whom we receive by faith.

That brings me back to the splendid reading from Isaiah that we have also heard. By now we know that Isaiah – or rather the three prophets who composed the book designated by that name – is the great prophet of longing for salvation and the promise of redemption. This reading, from Chapter 64, confirms that impression. Israel cries out in agony to God for healing and restoration: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” The prophet calls through the pain of apparent abandonment to a God who seems to have hidden his face and turned away.

In the best Jewish fashion – Israel wrestling with its God - he almost attempts to bargain with the Lord, pointing out that the holy cities have been despoiled, Jerusalem has become a desolation and the holy and beautiful temple of the Lord has been burned with fire. It is

a lamentation to match any of the most terrible cries of desolation in the Psalms.

Yet we know that God did answer that cry – though in a most unexpected and unimaginable way. Love does not send messengers to do its work – love comes itself. Yet when he came to us in Jesus Christ he did it not with dramatic effect, not by tearing open the heavens and descending like a mighty hero. His birth at Bethlehem, his descent from above was as a 15th century English carol contemporary with this church, puts it, much more silent and still:

He came all so still

Where his mother was,

As dew in April that falleth on the grass...

When “love came down at Christmas” it was in response to centuries of human yearning for redemption so powerfully expressed in Isaiah’s prophecy. It answered every longing heart, every desire for life and love which wells up within us. That is why John could say, crying in the wilderness and quoting Isaiah, that in Jesus Christ all humankind shall see the salvation of God: for as the angels announced at his birth and as Isaiah the 5th Evangelist had prophesied long ago, he is the fulfilment of all our hopes. This Christmas, welcome him again as who he is really is – our true and living Saviour, Jesus Christ our Lord.

