

St Mary's Parish Church, Handsworth
Second Sunday of Advent 2020

Ruth Cooper, Parish Reader

May I speak in the name of the living God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

First of all, let me say how wonderful it is to be back in church. We have missed out on so many things this year, that it is lovely that not only do we have our online congregation with us, but also all of you here today. It's great to see you.

Last year in Advent I talked about waiting, and that is something that we have all had plenty of practice with this year; waiting to see each other, waiting to see if we still have jobs to go back to, waiting to shop at Primark.

Today we are looking at John the Baptist. He is one of the central characters of the Christmas story, for his mother Elizabeth was pregnant with him at the same time as her cousin Mary was pregnant with Jesus. Just as Mary was chosen by God to bear his son, Elizabeth, a woman past child bearing age and thought to be barren, was chosen to have John. And like Jesus, John's name was picked for him, not by his parents, but by God. And (I know because my son is called John,) that the name John means Beloved of God.

Way back in the book of Isaiah we hear how the prophet tells the people that God will send John, he is the voice of one calling in the desert. And John lived simply, eating locusts and honey and wearing rough clothing, and promising that After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptise you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.

John offered baptism in the river Jordan, to those who repented of their sins and turned back to God. (And we the church still offer baptism by water to those who turn to Christ. But we now expect the gift of the Holy Spirit at the same time as we accept that baptism.)

But the most intriguing part of the story I feel is that when Jesus showed up and asked John to baptise him in the Jordan, John immediately recognised Jesus as the ONE; despite the fact that until that point Jesus had not begun his ministry. Was it because as cousins, they knew the stories of their births? Maybe it was, but that doesn't detract from that moment of recognition; the moment where John sees and knows that Jesus is the Christ, the promised messiah.

So now we find ourselves waiting again for Christmass, for the incarnation of the Christ child. And now our job is to point people to that same man, that God, that Saviour, Jesus.

Now if lockdown has done one good thing for me, it has given me time to – no not do housework – to take up the challenge that we were all set last January, to read the bible in a year.

This last few days we have been reading the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians. Chapter 12 reminds us that a body is made up of several parts and that each part is necessary for that body to function as it should. Paul then likens the church to a body. Each one of us has a special job to do and we are all equally important. It doesn't matter if you are the one who logs people into church or if you are the organist, or the preacher, we all matter and we all work better if everyone pulls their weight. I ought to thank those who have offered to learn to work the livestreaming equipment, because that's a job I certainly don't feel competent to do; but it doesn't matter because within the church we are provided with people to do all the jobs, we all have our own spiritual gifts.

However, one thing that we are all called on to do is to make disciples of others. We must try to point people to Christ. We need to help people to recognise Christ as John recognised him.

It sounds like a tall order. But God, St. Peter reminds us, is patient with us. We are not asked to eat honey and locusts, thank goodness, though I'm told that they are very nutritious. We are allowed to wear nice clothes and we don't have to live anywhere else but where we find ourselves today. If we try to live holy and Godly lives, try to be more Christ like ourselves, we will attract people to us. We need to remember that Jesus befriended the down and outs, the poor, the lonely, those on the fringes of society. We can make a difference to our communities, by our actions and that **will make** people notice us.

Now more than ever, people are battling with loneliness, with poverty and worrying over the future, and we need to reach out to those less fortunate than ourselves. We need to set an example.

So, this Christmas, it's not about the gifts to your partner or your children, it isn't about what you want to receive, it is about thoughtfulness. Perhaps it's food donations in supermarkets, perhaps a cash payment to the Rectory to help those who come knocking. It's about ringing someone to see how they are or sending a letter in with your Christmas card.

It's about coming to our services – if you are able, or watching them if you're not and inviting someone from your bubble to come along with you. Okay we can't offer you a cup of coffee but maybe there will be a mince pie to help your self to on the way out.

If Covid has taught us one thing it is that we are more important than material possessions and that God is giving us the strength to get through this and to learn valuable lessons along the way.

Thanks be to God. Amen