

## Prayer

Most of us above a certain age have seen them – rather dour looking people standing on main shopping streets and wearing sandwich boards bearing the words Repent or Burn in Hell – or as Private Fraser in Dad’s Army might have said you’re all doomed – and selectively quoting Bible verses to back them up.

Generally, I think we felt it was all rather embarrassing and possibly even crossed over to the other side of the road to avoid engaging.

I was reminded of them when reading a story recently about a Salvation Army meeting in London’s East End where a young Salvation Army woman officer approached a rather grim looking man –apparently a churchgoer – and asked him if he was saved. “Of course I am,” he replied tartly. ‘Well sir,’ she said bravely, ‘I suggest you tell your face about it as soon as possible.’

Amazingly her rebuke worked.

On the face of it, sorry, no pun intended, one might have thought the same about John the Baptist. A street corner tell-it-as-it-is preacher transported to the desert, his only authority his passion for God, John urgently calls on his audience to repent and refers to the Pharisees and Sadducees as a brood of vipers.

This week, we have lit the candle of peace, yet John is one of the last people we associate with peace. Far from it, confrontation seems to be the name of his game. Remember, at one time he even seemed doubtful that Jesus was the promised Messiah because of his more softly, softly approach to the Romans and religious authorities.

In theory, then, he was just the sort of person who would be a turn off for his potential listeners especially as Matthew, unlike Mark and Luke, doesn’t even hold out the prospect of forgiveness after repentance – something Matthew keeps back until the Last Supper.

But not a bit of it. Here in our Gospel reading we have crowds flocking to the desert to hear John the Baptist and to be baptised by him. So what was it about him that attracted people in their hundreds if not thousands?

Well, I would suggest that unlike his 20<sup>th</sup> century counterparts he was offering hope. Repent, **for the Kingdom of God is near ... the Kingdom of God is near.**

For Jews that would have been an enticing prospect – after all Israel hadn't had a prophet for 450 odd years – Malachi – and not for about a further 250 years before that.

John the Baptist was clearly the new Elijah – something Matthew makes abundantly clear by giving him the same clothes and diet as Elijah – but John made it absolutely clear that he was just the messenger and that he wasn't fit to tie the Messiah's shoelaces. So clearly something really exciting, something new was in the offing.

As I am sure you know, repentance isn't really just about saying sorry for our past sins and trying to do better. Literally, it involves rethinking our way of living and being transformed into a new way of life.

That is, I think, why John was so critical of the Pharisees and Sadducees because he knew they were only paying lip service to the idea of change and had no intention of being transformed. It's not their heritage that will save them, John says, it's their fruit.

And that applies to us too just as much as it did to them. Have we allowed ourselves or indeed committed ourselves to be transformed? It's not enough to say we have always believed in God or that we have turned from our old ways, John challenges us. That turning needs to be reflected in the fruit we bear.

I think it's little wonder that what one might call ordinary people came flocking to hear him, eager to hear his words full of hope – even if they were also challenging words – eager to hear his message of deliverance and to take up his offer of baptism, even though baptism wasn't really a Jewish thing,

Nevertheless, being baptised by John in the Jordan would have been incredibly symbolic for his listeners, reminding them of their entry into the promised land. Equally significant is perhaps the fact that John was in the wilderness, again symbolising the Exodus from Egypt.

Sometimes we forget how important wilderness is when we are seeking to deepen and strengthen our relationship with God: John lived in the wilderness;

Jesus went into the wilderness immediately after his baptism and Paul did the same shortly after his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus.

So our times in the wilderness, although not necessarily pleasant, and rarely peaceful, are also not necessarily times to be feared because they offer hope that we will be closer to God when we emerge than when we went in. John says Jesus is coming to judge us, and let's face it if we hear the word judgmental, we invariably assume it has negative connotations. But if you look up the word judgment in the dictionary, you will see words like discernment and perception.

So perhaps what John is getting at is that we have a Messiah who sees us for who we are, for what we are, and perhaps most importantly, for where we are, in other words we have a Messiah who sees us as we are, whether that's in a good place, or in a hard place or somewhere in between.

Wherever we find ourselves, and we will have been in all of those places at one time or another, Jesus wants to be with us, in relationship with us. He knows what it's like to be in a hard place, he knows what it is to struggle, he's been to Gethsemane, he's been to the cross and beyond, so we can take those difficult places to him knowing that he isn't going to come down on us like a ton of bricks for having doubts and fears and struggles. Wherever we are, however we're feeling, Jesus still loves us unconditionally and that gives us hope.

When we look at the other readings, they too offer hope – Isaiah may talk about a stump of a nation, a dream destroyed if you like, yet Verse also talks of the Spirit of the Lord resting on the shoot of Jesse – a prophecy that the Messiah, ie Jesus, will come from the line of David and Jesse, yet at the same time, as the final verse tells us, the eternal Christ is also the root of Jesse. So the Messiah is both shoot and root.

In other words, out of that destroyed dream comes a new dream, a new hope. Advent reminds us that hope out of despair is possible, that life out of death is a reality.

What it also tells us is that God is always doing a new thing, often in ways we don't see or understand, bringing hope to the downtrodden, the marginalised, the oppressed, the least and the lost.

When we look at Romans, Paul too focuses on hope as one of the main themes of what he is saying. He starts off by saying that what we call the Old Testament was written 'for our instruction so that by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.'

And he finishes by saying May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

What hope was Paul referring to? Most likely that just as God was faithful to our faith ancestors, so he will be faithful to us too.

Because Advent culminates in Christmas, our focus in Advent is often on the Incarnation when really it should be on the second coming. After all, you can't really hope for something you already have. Hope is more a yearning for what we don't have. That can range from the trivial to the hugely important.

In terms of the things that really matter, for Christians that might mean hoping for a closer relationship with, and deeper understanding of, God. It might mean wondering what sustains our hope for the future, or how our hope differs from the hope that Paul and John the Baptist refer to. What does it mean to us anyway to abound in hope? Perhaps another way of putting it is how do our faith and hope intersect?

Well, as one commentator put it: We need to have hope about our future and about the future of our faith because no-one is attracted to hopelessness! What can we do to sustain our hope and our faith? Well, the best and most obvious place to start is by regularly reading our Bible because there are literally hundreds of verses, many in the Psalms, that talk about hope. And the Bible also is where we will find God's promises to us laid out across the Old Testament and New Testaments, not least that God promises multiple times to be with us in our troubles. Perhaps a good place to start is Isaiah 43.

Drawing all these threads together, the challenging question for us is who is going to bring hope to the world today. There aren't many prophetic voices out there today – a few but not enough. The answer is us, all of us.

Trevor Hudson, a wonderful writer and pastor, suggests that our challenge is to live in the present moment as agents of the future hope we have, to share it where we come across despair and discouragement. Quite often of course we

will need to ask God to give us the right words to bring light and hope to those in darkness.

And as we make a deliberate choice to be a person of hope to those we come across, perhaps we will also need to remind our faces that, as Paul tells us in Romans, we do indeed abound in hope.

So let us be a signal to the world that God lives among us, that there is a way to know peace, that there is hope in the middle of despair, that even in brokenness there can be joy