

Revd Michael Burns
Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon : December 5th, 2021
“Second Sunday of Advent”

SERMON : ADVENT 2, 2021

It is often reported that the UK has the most gridlocked roads of any country in Europe and that it is getting worse. I can quite believe it. Driving a car in London becomes something of a liability – thank goodness for our public transport I say! For the numbers of cars and lorries is increasing hugely and it is equally unsurprising how rough and full of holes the roads can become due to the weight of traffic.

Today we read about John the Baptist coming out of the desert and calling on everyone with the urgent message ‘Get the road ready’. But of course, he wasn’t literally talking about the roads for walking and driving but was meaning ‘you need to get yourselves ready like a good, straight road’ – in other words fill in the potholes in our lives that are preventing us from living as God wants us to live.

I recently found this interpretation of what John meant as it might be told to children: “Look at your life and see that there might be holes of selfishness and meanness and gaping holes in our loving. They need to be filled with kindness and thoughtfulness. Perhaps there are gaps in our honesty because we don’t always tell the truth or live the truth. These holes need filling up with truthfulness and integrity”. Wise words aimed at children – but surely applicable to us adults too?

For running as a thread through the Old Testament it had long been prophesied that there would be a messenger to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah. Now here in the New Testament comes John the Baptist with his urgent message of repentance. God, knowing human nature all too well, tells us beforehand what he will do and so sends John.

Amongst the people of those times, there will have been those who, having heard the prophecies of the Old Testament, are already waiting expectantly, ready to latch on to what the messenger is saying. but John points on towards someone else, to Jesus. There will also have been those who, through John's urgent message, were sorting their lives out so that when Jesus' ministry began, their hearts would be ready to receive what he has to say and recognise him for who he is.

So today we hear the list of the rulers in power when John the Baptist appeared. Thus, Luke signals from the start that his book is about the most important stage in human history – in other words, Jesus' time on earth. Through his preaching and his ministry of a symbolic washing away of sins, John 'prepares the way of the Lord' indicating publicly and clearly God's new start for his world and its people.

Yet, in all this, though the message of God to the world has remained constant, the world has changed and is continuing to change – and the Church has to change with it. But change is not a prominent word in the vocabulary of the Church. Yet the Church today, as never before, IS having to look to new ways of BEING the Church. It is why your Church Council work very hard to continue the work of this church for the future in a whole variety of ways particularly in these uncertain and challenging times. It is why our Diocese is having to make hard decisions as they look to the future – to ensure that there will be many flourishing congregations in the future.

Yet the issues that face us today are probably nothing new. I sense that it has always been challenging to be a Christian in whatever era people lived. Certainly, the times in which we live are daunting and uncertain for everyone – but we do not lose hope because we prepare ourselves in Advent to hear again the Christmas message of hope – a message which does not change and which can still give us courage more than 2000 years since the birth of the Saviour of the world. So, I'm content to leave the anxiety and the worry about the future of the Christian Church in the capable hands of God. I am certain that he knows what he is doing and we have to trust in him to guide us, his Church, in the steps we must take and the people we must be in the future. For I remain as certain and as full of faith as I humanly can be that God is laying the proper foundations through us and ensuring that there will be no need to paper over any cracks or make good the gaping potholes – for all will be made good in his time and in his hands.

One final thing. In this hectic time of preparation, perhaps we can all try to make a little space for ourselves this Advent – to be still in the presence of the Lord? To that end, I finish with some words from St Anselm. Anselm was an Italian Benedictine monk, abbot, philosopher and theologian, who held the office of Archbishop of Canterbury from 1093 to 1109. In the midst of his overwhelming responsibilities as Archbishop, he wrote these calming words which I leave with you: *“Come now; flee for a while from your tasks, hide yourself for a little space from the turmoil of your thoughts. Come, cast aside your burdensome cares, and put aside your laborious pursuits. For a little while, give your time to God, and rest in him. Enter into the chamber of your mind, shut out all things save God and whatever may aid you in seeking God; and having barred the door of your chamber, seek him.”*