

Chichester Cathedral
Second Sunday in Advent, 9 December 2018, 11.00am Eucharist

‘The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness’ (Luke 3.3). We might well pray, in these cataclysmic times, that our political leaders would be similarly enlightened by a divine word as they prepare to vote on Tuesday. Perhaps, indeed, we might learn something for days such as these from scrutinizing what happened to John, son of Zechariah, better known as John the Baptist, and the word that came to him.

In the prologue to John’s gospel, Jesus is memorably identified as the ‘Word made flesh’. This Word, with a capital W, was, we hear, from the beginning with God, and through him all things came into being. This Word, *logos* in Greek, is visible – the light that shines in the darkness. This Word is the source of all life and knowledge.

Today’s Gospel reading, from Luke, is rather different. It tells us the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah. But this ‘word’ does not have a capital letter. This word, *rhema*, not *logos*, in Greek, is invisible, and might have faded into silence, unheard. But, for all that, it is a word of God. It enters into time and space and is heard by John.

This is an Advent reading, not a Christmas reading. It anchors us in an historical context in which the prospect of a Saviour seemed as unlikely as it currently does in Parliament. The word came to John, we hear, in the fifteenth year of the reign of the Emperor Tiberius. Tiberius was an unhappy and deeply unpopular ruler. It is said that everyone rejoiced at the premature announcement of his death. When he unexpectedly revived, one of his military commanders promptly finished him off properly.

The word came to John, we hear, when Herod was ruler of Galilee. This is the Herod – Herod Archelaus – who is credited in Matthew’s gospel with the slaughter the innocents. He was so unpopular with the Jewish people that even Rome found him unsuitable and he was deposed in favour of Herod Antipas, before whom Jesus was later to appear on trial.

The word came to John, when Pilate was governor of Judea, and Annas and Caiaphas were high priests. These three figures all play their various parts in the injustices of that trial. Annas and Caiaphas reappear in Acts, playing a part in the persecution of the early church.

So – when Luke tells us that the word of God came to John ‘in the wilderness’ he may have had more in mind than simply the desert wastes into which the crowds flocked to hear him preach. This outpost of a corrupt empire was a wilderness of immorality, injustice, violence, and the abuse of power. It is into such a context – which has its resonances with our own times – that the word comes.

We aren’t told exactly what God said to John. However, we can reconstruct the gist of the message from what Luke tells us next. Repentance, forgiveness and salvation seem to have been important themes.

The phrase, ‘the word of God came to John’ is reminiscent of the calling of Old Testament prophets. Luke’s quotation from Isaiah further suggests a prophetic vocation. But Luke seems more concerned to tell us that the word came to John, than what the word actually was. Here it is worth keeping in mind the Hebrew understanding of God’s word as closely allied to God’s action. In Genesis, when God says ‘Let there be...’, things are created. Now, after centuries during which the prophetic voice had not been heard in Israel, when the word of God comes to John, it means God is about to do something new and important.

John is not the only one to hear a heavenly voice in the early chapters of Luke’s gospel. Zechariah, Mary, and the shepherds, for example, all have visionary encounters with angels. Later in Chapter 3, when Jesus is baptized, he also hears a voice: ‘You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.’ (v22) According to Luke, the crowd hear this voice too.

So – Luke is in effect saying – don’t imagine that when God did something new and important in the birth of his Son, this happened without being properly announced. Heaven was not silent at the coming of this child, or at the beginning of his adult ministry. And John was sent to be a voice crying out in preparation for his coming.

But voices are ephemeral. They are heard briefly and they fade away. We can doubt that we have understood correctly. And so it is that further on in Luke’s Gospel, John the Baptist sends his disciples to Jesus to ask

‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’ (7:20)

Jesus’s reply is to point John’s attention to what has been happening: ‘Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor [receive] good news...’ (7:22)

The truth of the voice, its meaning and authority, are confirmed not so much in the experience of hearing the word as in what happens next. The word is open to doubt, but when it is really God that has spoken, the mission of God unfolds.

Advent is a time of waiting and preparation for the coming of God among us. What I want to suggest this morning is that part of that preparation should be careful *listening*: a listening to Scripture of course, but also a listening out for contemporary prophets who may have a word – lower case – for times such as these.

Let me suggest to you a few contenders, and invite you to consider who you would nominate. The naturalist Sir David Attenborough, white haired and venerable, is an obvious choice. He even looks like a prophet these days! Speaking at the opening ceremony of a recent United Nations-sponsored conference in Poland, he said, ‘Right now, we are facing a man-made disaster of global scale. Our greatest threat in thousands of years. Climate change.’ He went on to speak of the collapse of civilisations and the extinction of ‘much of the natural world’. Attenborough’s message has much in common with parts of the Bible known as ‘apocalyptic’, and gives a necessary global perspective to our current obsession with Brexit.

So too does my second nomination for a contemporary prophet, who you are much less likely to have heard of. He is Hans Rosling, a Swedish doctor, academic, statistician, and public speaker who died last year, but whose voice lives on in a book and online videos of his lectures. Here is just one of a number of questions he regularly asked his audiences:

‘In the last twenty years, the proportion of the world living in extreme poverty has: one, almost doubled. Two, stayed more or less the same. Three, almost halved.’ I won’t ask you to put your hand up, but I can tell you that on average just 9% of the UK population get the answer right. So if you knew that over the last twenty years, the proportion of the world living in extreme poverty has almost halved – well done, but you’re in a small minority. Perhaps you also knew that life expectancy, child mortality, and the education of girls have all massively improved in recent years.

The argument at the heart of Hans Rosling’s career is encapsulated in the title of a posthumously published book: *Factfulness: Ten Reasons We’re Wrong About the World – and Why Things Are Better Than You Think*. A fact based worldview, he argues, is less stressful and more hopeful than one based on the kind of drama the media feeds on. Small changes each year result in huge changes over decades. By looking at reliable data, we see that the world is not as bad as it often seems, and we can see what we have to do to keep making it better. Who says prophecy always has to be about doom and gloom? What it is always about, however, is revealing and pointing to the truth.

The work of my third and final nomination, the political economist Will Hutton, is very much focussed on the UK. He points out that seven out of the ten poorest regions in Northern Europe are in England. Whatever happens in Parliament on Tuesday, we must as a nation address how difficult and impoverished are the lives of individuals and whole communities. We must face rather than ignore these destructive social ills, for painful divisions over Brexit are actually not our main problem, but rather the symptom of something deeper.

Will Hutton has something in common with the great eighth century (BC) prophets such as Amos and Hosea, reminding all of us and most of all our leaders, of the cry of the poor and the priority of social justice.

I am not suggesting any of these voices are equal to the speaking of God’s Word with a capital W– the Logos, the Word made flesh, – into history. Whether their message is ephemeral or longlasting, we cannot know now for certain. But nonetheless they and others are worth taking seriously, as we listen for a (lower case) word to come to us in our wilderness, as our nation awaits what will unfold on Tuesday and beyond.

So let us listen carefully this Advent. The word of God – *rhema* – has come to us. It announces the coming of the Word made flesh – the Logos, the Christ, in whom all things are put into proper perspective. ‘Let anyone with ears to hear listen’. (Luke 8:8, 14:25) **AMEN.**