

# CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	14 December 2025
Service:	Eucharist, Third Sunday of Advent
Preacher:	The Revd Canon Vanessa Baron, Treasurer

I wonder if you can remember an occasion when you have prepared for something quite hard – put in time and effort and then suddenly it has to change. You were expecting one thing – planned it, thought it through carefully, prepared it even and then something happens – and everything has to change. If you're like me, you can find this quite difficult - it can be frustrating and disappointing.

Today on the 3 Sunday Advent, we celebrate John the Baptist – that bold preacher who figures at the beginning of all four Gospels – Jesus' cousin who chose to live in the desert outside Jerusalem. Uncompromising, like an Old Testament prophet and altogether different, with his clothes made from camel hair and his diet gleaned from whatever he could find –such as locusts and wild honey!

But by Matthew 11, John the Baptist is in prison, put there by Herod, because John the Baptist had dared to oppose Herod's marriage on moral grounds. Being held in one of Herod's prisons was unlikely to have a happy ending and it seems that John the Baptist, having heard what Jesus was doing, hesitated and was possibly rather disappointed. He sends some of his disciples to Jesus with the question, "Are you the one who is to come or are we to look for another?" What had gone wrong?

You will remember that John the Baptist is portrayed as the forerunner for the Messiah – the one clearing the path for him by calling the people to repent/ to change their lifestyle and to be baptised as a sign of this change of heart. He was, as I have said, uncompromising and outspoken –he loathed the complacency of the Pharisees, calling them 'you brood of vipers!' He demanded that tax collectors be honest and occupying soldiers not to use their power to exploit people. Like the Old Testament prophets, he warned of

coming judgement (the wrath to come) and of the power of the coming Messiah.

Maybe therefore John was disappointed when news reached him of what Jesus was doing. Jesus' concern for the poor and his miracles were not part of the common Jewish expectation of what the Messiah would do and possibly John the Baptist was struggling to understand - particularly with his emphasis on moral conduct, struggling to understand the type of company that Jesus kept, people that any careful Jew would seek to avoid. This was not quite what John the Baptist had expected, so the question comes, was Jesus really the Messiah? Jesus' answer is twofold. He does not condemn John the Baptist for his hesitation or his doubts - rather Jesus praises him and, using the words of Malachi 3.1, describes him as the 'messenger' ahead of the Messiah.

But he also tells John that some of his expectations are wrong. John had high hopes and they were being fulfilled but not quite as John had expected. Jesus' own understanding of his work as the Messiah was based on passages like Isaiah 35 and Isaiah 61. There in Isaiah 35, when the glory of the Lord appears, the blind will see, the lame walk, the lepers will be cleansed, the deaf hear - like water appearing in the dead, barren wilderness, the desert becoming a place which is life-giving. All of this was 'good news to the poor - to the humble'.

If what John wanted was condemnation of the religious elite, it was there in Jesus' ministry but not his top priority; nor was political liberation Jesus' concern was mercy, the relief of suffering and the restoration of sinners - a time consuming, spiritual irrelevance to those who wanted political freedom. 'Blessed are the poor' - said Jesus earlier in Matthew's Gospel - it took spiritual discernment to be able to understand Jesus' priorities and not be offended by him. John the Baptist did not have to look for another Messiah, but he did need to revise his expectations of what the Messiah would be like.

And so, I suspect, on occasions, do we.

### **Application**

Like John the Baptist, we wait in Advent, with eager hope and expectation, for Jesus to come among us but we need to be alert to the fact that he may do so in unexpected ways.

1) One of the Advent themes is that we look forward to Jesus coming again as a righteous and just Judge - to deal with the injustice and cruelty in the world. Judgment may not be a very popular aspect of Advent but for many people in the world it is one for which they long and so we pray, 'Maranatha, come Lord,

come! We look for Christ's Second Coming. But as we do so, we need to be prepared; to listen to the original message of John the Baptist and be prepared to repent; to keep short accounts with God as the Day of the Lord will come 'like a thief in the night', when we least expect it.

2) We wait for reassurance and hope in an uncertain world.

We've just listened to the choir sing Psalm 146. 'Blessed is he who has the God of Jacob for his help and whose hope in the Lord his God – who made heaven and earth, the sea and all that therein is – who keepeth his promise for ever.'

Hope is one of the theological virtues, along with faith and love. It is rooted in the unchanging goodness of God and of the certainty of God's character and promises. But what we might not expect is that, like any other virtue, it can be nurtured and encouraged. We can work at it – just as we would work at other virtues like honesty and kindness.

I've been reading an Advent Book by the Jesuit writer, Gemma Simmonds', 'Donkey Roads and Camel Treks.' She writes, 'Hope is also a habit – it's a way of thinking about our present reality and future prospects and acting like people who trust in the ultimate triumph and power of God's goodness.' 'Hope, like every virtue, is a choice that becomes a practice that becomes a spiritual muscle memory.'

I think this is my Advent Challenge, to cultivate hope as I might other virtues such as kindness or truthfulness.

To conclude, John the Baptist was the voice crying in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord', but when the Lord came, he did so in a manner that John was not expecting. We pray that this Advent we may be watching, waiting and alert so that the Lord Jesus Christ may come to us, in whatever way he chooses.