**Isaiah 11: 1-10; Romans 15: 4-13; Matthew 3: 1-12**

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

The four Sundays of Advent go under a variety of names: I tend to go with the grouping of God’s people, the prophets, John the Baptist and Mary the mother of Jesus. We light two purple candles on the first two Sundays, then John the Baptist gets the pink/rose candle (and people think I’ve made a mistake, but I promise I haven’t – the middle(ish) Sunday is a sort of refreshment, like Mothering Sunday in the middle of Lent - and Mary gets the final purple one.

Some people use the groupings: death, judgement, heaven and hell, but I find them a bit grim and I’m not sure I could preach with any conviction on each of them in turn. And some people use Hope, Peace, Love and Joy – which are nice but almost too nice….. We need a bit of disruption and challenge in our lives and that is the role and raison d’etre of a prophet, so John the Baptist it is then.

John is well-described by the phrase ‘one who speaks truth to power. Which, coincidentally, is the chance we are getting this week – do please vote; it is an important part of our Christian life to exercise the opportunity to influence our world for good. Remember the ubiquitous Serenity prayer: God, give me the courage to change the things I can (but then also to accept the things I can’t change and the wisdom to know the difference). Pray particularly for the parliamentary candidates in our own constituency this week; that they might have honesty, integrity and compassion in all their dealings, both now and in the future.

So back to the story: the message we get here from John the Baptist is a strong one: repent. Say sorry and mean it. But it is more than that. If we look at the Biblical Hebrew for the word repent, we come up with two parts: feel sorrow; and return. And the New Testament Greek talks about ‘metanoia’, which combines the ideas of time and change, so you end up with something that intends that afterwards the one who repents should be different. The emphasis is less on what is wrong with what one is doing now, and more on what is right and important and necessary about what one will henceforth do differently.

I had a conversation this week with someone who commented on the power of the confession in the Communion service and its importance to them. We **do** all have the capacity for bad. There is darkness in each of us and this dark season of Advent is a good time to remember that. And so we need to acknowledge that.

But then I responded with my standard reminder that the confession is always followed by the absolution. And I stand by that, not as a get-out of jail free card, but as a reminder that, what**ever** we have done, God’s love for each one of us is far stronger than our ability to resist it. It is so important to remember that, every time we ask for forgiveness – properly truly ask for it - it will be granted. But there is no absolution without there first being confession.

There is a weighty tome by a chap called David Bentley Hart, entitled That all shall be saved. I have always been an out and out universalist, and David Bentley Hart, I am delighted to report, agrees with me. He makes the case far more theologically than I could, that if God is the good creator of all, then he is also the saviour of all, without fail and without exception.

Thinking about repentance underlines the fact that change isn’t necessary for change’s sake, but rather because we have become aware that our actions are out of line with God’s will for peace and equity for **all** God’s people and for the **whole** of creation. Repentance is realizing that God is pointing you in one direction, but that you have been moving in another direction - and changing course as a result of that realisation.

Once we look at it like that, however, we find that repentance gets pretty daunting pretty quickly. There are so many things I could repent of, we as a community and nation could repent of, even we as a species could and should repent of. Pollution and climate change. Poverty and food scarcity. Racial, gender and orientation injustice. The lack of clean water. Overflowing prisons. The divorce rate. The number of children living below the poverty level. Crime and violence, both physical and verbal. And the list goes on. And the list is so depressing that it becomes tempting just to give up on the whole thing and to batten down the hatches of our own little bubbles with our comfortable and same-y friends and opinions, and watch another box set.

So if some sort of general repentance is too much to handle, maybe this Advent we can do just three things that echo John the Baptist’s call this morning – a call ratified, we note, in both the Old Testament reading from Isaiah (with righteousness he shall judge the poor and decide with equity for the meek of the earth) and the New Testament reading from Romans (may the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another…).

So, yes, three things:

1. (One) Daydream about what God’s vision for you might be. Who is God calling you to be? As an individual/as a family member/as a work colleague/as a member of this church community. I say daydream because the bit in that Isaiah reading talks about a world where there is no predator and no prey – it is not a goal to be achieved; it is a dream, a direction to set a course on.
2. (Two) Choose one element of your life that calls you to repent and do differently. An unhealthy relationship with someone/ a different use of time/ a practice that would make a difference to you or to someone else.
3. (Three) Identify one element of our communal life, our life as a church, that also needs repentance. What can we repent of collectively as the body of Christ in this place that would cause us to do something differently in a way that would benefit either others or ourselves.

Over time, Advent has shrunk, I think, in our minds. I have preached the whole ‘preparing for Christmas’ thing to death: *Slow down, stop buying presents, make time for church, don’t get caught up in all the seasonal bling and show*. Yes, those things do have something to do with Advent, but I don’t think they adequately cover all that Advent is about.

The point of Advent is to make room for Christ’s arrival; to be surprised all over again that God was ready and willing to come into our lives and history and to take on our human vulnerability in order to give us hope in the eternal future. God isn’t supposed to do that, is God? God is supposed to sit up in heaven alternately smiling or frowning at us from a distance, depending on our behaviour.

But the God we know doesn’t do that. The God we know in the person of Jesus Christ comes down out of heaven to take on our lot and our life, not to beat us over the head but to help us to see in the face of our neighbour not a competitor for scarce resources but a brother or sister in Christ. Advent doesn’t give us less Christmas; it gives us more authenticity.

If we try this repentance lark, the Sundays in Advent become opportunities to discern God’s call, to view honestly where we have wandered off, and to see with clarity the straight path John the Baptist points us to.

And finally, just one quote that I came across this week that feels a bit relevant too. The great Mahatma Gandhi was once asked: what’s your take on human civilisation? I think, he said, that it would be a good idea…

**Amen**