

The Third Sunday of Advent
Fr Jonathan Jong

Isaiah 61:1-2, 10-11

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8,19-28

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

It is not clear to me either, why the putters together of the lectionary have deemed it necessary to introduce us to John the Baptizer two Sundays in a row. But they did, and we are quickly reacquainted with the man from God, who offers nothing less than waters of baptism and rumours of greatness, even whose shoelaces are sacred.

In typical fashion, the Fourth Gospel's account is less rich on physical detail than St Mark's: absent are the references to locusts and leather, honey and hair shirts, all sacrificed for talk of light and knowledge, and a curt exchange consisting almost entirely of interrogation and negation, about which the evangelist

editorialises, tongue—I assume—lodged firmly in cheek: he did not deny, but confessed. *I am not the Messiah; not Elijah; no, not the prophet either. And there's this guy I'm also not, who cometh after me: and you do not know him.* All of which is to say that we don't know how to talk, whether about him or about ourselves, at least not until he comes, until word is made flesh.

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Let's be straight with one another. I mean, let's not kid ourselves: we all already know that the logic of the pulpit dictates that my job is to put us in the place of John the Baptist, bearing witness to the light that all might believe. And to do so, not by words—for we are no less tongue-tied than he was—but by deeds: sacramental acts like baptism, to be sure, but also acts of charity commensurate with the great gift we have received.

By the end of these ten minutes or so, we are meant to have our hearts opened, and our wallets as well; we are meant to be eager to bring good tidings to the

afflicted, bind up the brokenhearted, free the imprisoned, and comfort the mourning. I will note, in due course, that *Oxford Homeless Pathways* still needs funds for their Christmas event; last year, they had 140 people over for dinner, who might otherwise have spent Christmas alone. They have a JustGiving page, which you will ask me about later. And I will remind you that *The Gatehouse* would like more warm clothes and chocolate bars, and that their present wrapping day is this coming Wednesday, and is open to anybody, no registration required, just down the road at St Giles's, starting at 11. If last year is any indication, you will generously flood our parish office with bags of socks and hats and gloves and treats, some of you having ordered them online when you get home from mass today to arrive just in time.

And I'm happy to oblige, and so are you. This is what we do, year on year, like clockwork. Like liturgy. And as with liturgy, I find the regularity of Christmas charity encouraging. It is so easy these days to be cynical and despairing. But the *Oxford Winter Night Shelter* has enough money this year, and more than enough volunteers to run from January to March. And

the *Oxford Community Soup Kitchen* already has a new oven installed, after their previous one exploded in November. And this week, *Project Shoebox* started delivering their donated and wrapped gifts to women in domestic abuse refuges. This is good news, to the homeless and lonely and brokenhearted, to whom the kingdom of God belongs. But it is also good news for all of us, because what happens to the least happens to Christ. It is worth rejoicing about and giving thanks for this Gaudete Sunday, that people—including many of you—sometimes come together, and make the world just that much better.

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And yet—I hope it is not too Scrooge-like of me to suggest—our rejoicing must be tempered by dissatisfaction and impatience. We do not yet live in a world in which righteousness has sprung forth before all nations. The news is rarely good, and while it is tempting to think that media companies make mountains out of molehills to keep us hooked, the truth of the matter is that we are more often shielded from a great deal of what happens in the world and to

it. If certain tragedies get sensationalised, they get forgotten before their time, and many more are marginalised altogether. Two thousand Christmasses later, and we are still here, and the poor with us.

A year later, and Haiti is still struggling from the aftermath of Hurricane Matthew, last year's most devastating natural disaster, which destroyed 200,000 homes, and the cholera outbreak that followed on its heels. We sent our money then, and our prayers too, but have since moved on to other things. But they haven't: I read in the New York Times on Wednesday night that the number of unclaimed corpses there is ever increasing, because people are too poor to bury their dead.¹ Other pressing matters vie for our interest, of course—natural disasters and humanitarian crises and outbreaks of violence and oppression happen all the time, all of which deserve our attention—but we have also heard more about the American President's social media shenanigans than we have about the two million people going hungry in Eritrea because of El Niño; and another two million

¹ https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/12/13/world/americas/haiti-death-funerals.html?_r=0

unable to feed their families in Burundi, ravaged by political violence and drought and natural disasters; the four million people whose homes and livelihoods were destroyed by floods in Bangladesh this year.

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All of which is just to say that we need prophets, to remind us what we are about. And we have always had them. From Isaiah to John the Baptist, about whom we have heard two Sundays in a row; to Bartolomé de la Casas to Óscar Romero to Dorothy Day. And we have always despised them, but God has always sent them all the same. If we listened instead, they might just help us understand ourselves and our own times, help us to hold fast what is good, and abstain from evil. Prophets are, after all, the consciences of their generations, messengers of both hope and judgement; and even when they cannot quite articulate what is to come, they might still be able to prepare us for it and guide us on paths made straight. What baptism we need for our own times, I do not know, but we best be listening for that voice, crying in the wilderness, crying for righteousness, crying the

good news, crying with joy that the Lord has come indeed, and crying with desperation for the Lord to come in haste.

This is no easy task in our world, or if history is any indication, in any world: the cacophony of our culture poses a real challenge, bombarded as it is with the memeified mendacities of the twittering classes, inundated as it is with data weaponised into the mockery of truth. The twin temptations, toward cynicism and callousness is strong: it is all too easy either to deny the problems of our world or to throw up our hands at the enormity of job of solving them. But neither are Christian options, not ever, but certainly not on the way to Christmas. The questions we are compelled to ask ourselves are, like all good moral and theological questions, unapologetically practical ones. How will we, in all this noise and busyness, meet the poor and sad and lonely, in whom Christ is present, and serve them? How will our own poverty and sadness and loneliness be met by Christ, if we are too distracted to receive his peace, the peace of his Father who makes us holy and whole?

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Oxford Homeless Pathways is still seeking donations for their party; they're expecting to host as many people this year as last, if not more. They have a JustGiving page.

The Gatehouse is still seeking nice warm things, fit for gifting: hats and gloves and scarves and socks. The wrapping party at St Giles's starts at 11, this coming Wednesday.

Voices are crying in the wilderness for us to hear, if we have ears to hear them, and hearts to receive them, garland them, robe them, even whose shoelaces are sacred.

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**