

Advent Voices

Session 2:

The Voice of John the Baptist, that brings challenge

Welcome to the second online session, listening to the voices of Advent.

Last time we thought about the voice of God that brings light into our dark world - light that will ultimately dispel any and all darkness, when all nations, all peoples, will come before God's light. We remembered too, that God's light reaches into the darkness of our own lives, so we spent some time doing the traditional Advent thing of bringing our sin – our faults and our failings – into God's light and receiving God's forgiveness and cleansing, so we could walk away as children of the Advent Light. I hope you felt you met with God through this, as I hope you will do again through this session.

As previously, I have indicated * where music was played and where there was invitation to a specific action. But again this is primarily about taking time to sit in God's presence and hearing from God, through another Advent voice – this time that of John the Baptist. John's is the voice that challenges us and reminds us of the cost of walking in the light of God.

Matthew tells us 'In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

*'A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'*

John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River...' *Matthew 3:1-6*

Take a moment to try to picture John – the wild-looking man ... perhaps with long, matted hair wearing a long tunic of rough material... a cave dweller in the hot, dusty desert regions around the river Jordan, where he foraged for food... And from the wilderness he walks into the villages.

John's voice had been anticipated around seven centuries earlier, by the prophet Isaiah, who foresaw 'A voice crying out' in the wilderness, urging people to be ready for the Lord's appearance.

And it came to pass. John brought a clear, direct and urgent message: The one God's promised is coming! Get ready by confessing your sins and making public your allegiance to God.

John was not one to pull his punches...Religious teachers and officials came in for particularly severe censure but all the people of God were told clearly and unequivocally that neither their religion, nationality, background or ancestry would save them.

They needed to repent – and then bear fruit worthy of repentance.

They needed to repent – and change the ways in which they lived, because the one who was coming would bring about a new covenant relationship between God and the human race – based on repentance, acceptance and on-going behaviour, signified by baptism.

John's voice brought challenge. It urged people to action of mind and body.

And before we dig into what that same challenge might mean for us today, let's think about baptism.

If you can remember it, think about your own baptism. If you can't, think about what you were told...Or think about services of baptism you have been part of – perhaps of strangers who have come to have their child baptised, or of friends or the children of friends.

How do we understand baptism today? *

We're not going to debate the theological merits or otherwise of the current Church of England baptismal policy! Let's just recognise baptism as a public statement, made for over two thousand years in every corner of the world, that an individual belongs to God and to the family of God; the outward sign of the invisible grace of God at work in an individual, steadily transforming that person into God's likeness.

[At this point the invitation was given for people to renew their baptism vows and make the sign of the + on their own foreheads](#)

John told people to repent and be baptised... and then live in the light of that baptism.

Let's pause there ...

You might not think of yourself as a teacher or an official but to the people who know you, if you go to church, you are religious.

So are you living in the light of your baptism?

How is God, through John's voice, challenging you this Advent? *

Although it spoke of the good news to come, John's voice carried a warning. The good news will not be accepted by everyone and those who accept it must then "*bear fruit worthy of repentance*" (Matthew 3:8)

The one who is coming will carry a winnowing fork in his hand. "... *he will clear his*

threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire

John told people to repent and be baptised – and then bear fruit – because the one who is coming will judge – our decisions ... and our lives.

What do you understand by “bearing fruit”?

What constitutes bearing fruit for you?

And how important is bearing fruit? *

John is a strange figure. We know virtually nothing of his life except that, from conception to execution, it was shaped and directed by God.

John never speaks of himself – he always speaks beyond himself, pointing to Jesus, and his life demonstrates there is a cost to proclaiming God’s good news and bearing fruit to God’s glory.

So what has been, or is, or might be the cost to you?

...The awkwardness of being a child of God to unbelieving friends or our sceptical family?

...The repercussions of taking gospel teaching seriously in relation to our decisions, money, lifestyle?

Take a moment to consider the cost to you belonging to Jesus and bearing fruit *

And now, having thought about the challenging and sobering voice of John the Baptist, and if you are feeling that our following Jesus has been costly or that you have borne burdens and experienced difficulties because of it, hear the reassuring voice of Jesus to end the evening.

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”
Matt 11:28-30

Jesus is the one proclaimed by John, the one who has won for us salvation and the one who can enable us to bear our burdens in the here and now.

John told the people

“I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

However we are feeling at this point, before you end this time, ask God for a fresh outpouring of God’s Holy Spirit, to reassure and encourage you. *

