

Sermon preached at Wymondham Abbey

Advent 4, 2024 (8am)

Phil 4.4-7; John 1.19-28

It is the tradition of the western Church to hear the Epistle before the Gospel in the Eucharist, as just now. It means that we approach a Jesus story by means of some writing and thinking which came later, in the decades after Jesus' time on earth. So we usually hear some teaching based on an understanding of what Jesus meant, before we hear more directly about Jesus. It's not that the Epistle relates directly, interpretively to the Gospel story which follows, or rarely. But it's as though we begin in the world of interpretation, before moving on – moving back? – to the source material.

Having said all that, of course this morning the gospel story isn't straightforwardly a Jesus story either. It's about John the Baptist, and his self-effacing words *about* the Jesus who was just over the horizon, about to appear and begin his ministry. But it does put us where the season of Advent wants us to be: looking forward to the coming of Jesus, humble before such a magnificent intervention by God in the world.

There's something fascinating, really engaging, about John the Baptist's combination of prophetic energy and gruff humility. John the gospel-writer doesn't give us the eye-catching details we get in other gospels, the charismatic, grizzled figure living off locusts and wild honey and clad in camel-skin. What John the gospel-writer focuses on, exclusively and repeatedly, is John the Baptist's role as preparing the way for the coming of Jesus, testifying to him as the light, and emphasising his own very-secondary role.

This has narrative integrity and relevance, as we live liturgically through these Advent weeks of preparing to celebrate the coming of Jesus. But it also supplies us with a spiritually healthy challenge. Do we have that same kind of rigorous, prophetic fervour and profound humility?

Well we probably find the latter rather easier, at a basic level. Of course we aren't going to think of ourselves as anything other than less significant than Jesus. Mind you, we'd be wise to remember what pride is in the catalogue of vices. It's traditionally the worst of them all, because it involves putting me where God should be. Replace 'God' with 'Jesus' in that sentence, and then consider how you're doing! A practical way to tell is to ask whether what you're doing is what Jesus would want you to do.

In one literal way we are being like John the Baptist. We baptise with water, because Jesus commanded us to do so (in the final verses of Matthew's gospel). And our doing

that, as part of all that we do in church and in our lives, is because the Jesus before whom John the Baptist effaced himself, came to baptise the world *with his Spirit* (as Mark tells us in his gospel account). That's an extraordinary way of describing Jesus' mission, of understanding the meaning of his incarnation, and is definitely the stuff of a whole other sermon. But it means that our worshipping life, and every aspect of our lives as Christian people, must be founded in a lifelong quest to fathom what Jesus means and what he would have us do.

This is where we can turn back to that little Epistle that we heard. Paul is telling us how to pursue that quest, how to live that life. It should be a life characterised by rejoicing, by moderation (meaning gentleness), by not being careworn, by prayer and thanksgiving... and, says Paul, we are borne up in this endeavour by the peace God gives us. Such peace defies our understanding, but it takes care of our hearts and minds.

Not for nothing have those words become for us one of our most familiar blessings, and which you will hear at the end of this service. Because such is our human condition that we yearn for peace. Happily Christmas is a time when we celebrate that the birth of Jesus means the coming of a peace which may seem to elude us, but which is really there, daring us to believe in it.