

Advent 3 – Preparing the way

St James, Colwall, 12 December 2010

Last week, we had the story of John the Baptist calling people to repentance and baptising them as a symbol of the new life they were to follow and preparing the way for the coming of Jesus. He drew such crowds that he came to the attention of the establishment in the form of the Sadducees and Pharisees. John regarded them as a hindrance to his message and didn't mind telling them so in no uncertain terms: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" And not surprisingly, he ended up in prison. In preparing the way for the Messiah, John was looking for some great event in the future, an Apocalypse, so in the gospel reading today we have him asking whether the coming of Jesus in fact fulfils that event. The answer was, yes: but Jesus as the promised Messiah was not quite the event that John had in mind. It was not something sudden, but nevertheless it has changed the course of history.

In many ways, John the Baptist reminds me of an Eco Warrior or a deep green activist. With his clothing of camel's hair he was, shall I say, sartorially challenged; he was self-sufficient in his food, although I can't think that locusts and honey constitute a balanced diet; and he was warning of an imminent catastrophe, just like our environmentalists. It's all a bit off-putting, but John was right. Within 50 years Jerusalem was laid waste and within 50 years in our time climate change will be starting to have a big effect if we have not done anything about it, so the environmentalists are right to sound a warning too.

The future was very uncertain in Jesus time and it is uncertain for us now: there may be apocalyptic changes but there may also be slow and imperceptible ones. But the thing to remember is that, apocalyptic or not, the future contains potentiality for both good and evil. The last century contained three bad apocalyptic events: the first world war, the flu epidemic and the second world war, each claiming more lives than the previous one. Looking back now we can see what an awful event the second world war was. It was very bad in this country but absolutely awful in the countries of Eastern Europe and the far east. But also looking back over the last century we can see how things have changed for the better. Our standard of living is immeasurably improved; people everywhere are living longer; there is still much to be done in the world but there is absolutely no doubt that the world is a better place now than it was in 1945, but largely as a result of a widespread determination that things should be done differently after the war.

But what of the future? We should especially think about this in the baptism service where we are about to launch young children into a future which is uncertain. Now I don't want to be apocalyptic and frighten you into the kingdom of God, but rather let us all focus on the potentialities for good which lie in the future. The world can be an even better place than it is now, but only if we do things to make it so. We need to change direction which is exactly what that word repentance means. We need only do nothing for evil to flourish in the world, but the good needs actively nurturing. If we want our children to live in a peaceful and just world without poverty or hunger we need to do something about it now.

But what, exactly? Well, all I can say is, look around you. There are charities to support; and there are MPs to lobby; there are needs all around us where a helping hand can be very useful; and just by being engaged in society and participating in its activities we can change it.

But we need to look within ourselves as well. I have been watching Ian Hislop's television series on the Victorian do-gooders and what struck me was that these often eccentric individuals changed things largely because there was a widespread acceptance within society that things needed changing. We expect very high standards from our politicians and from those in power, but we should also expect the same high standards from ourselves if we are going to bring about the kind of changes that are needed.

So we do need to change the world, and it's a major job, but let's not underestimate the potential represented by one individual, even a small child. We are now in the season of Advent looking forward to the celebration of Christmas and the birth of a baby who really did change the whole world. But the potential of any baby is immense and in baptism we are entering that child on the side of the angels, to be a power to work for good in the world. But that potential can only be realised if, like John the Baptist, we have prepared the way.