

St George's Church

Isaiah 61: 1-4,8-11 Spirit of the Lord is upon me – good news to oppressed, broken, prisoner
1 Thess 5:16-24 Rejoice, pray, give thanks, hold to good, abstain from evil
John 1:6-8, 19-28 Who is John the Baptist?

3rd Sunday of Advent

On Friday there were further developments outside St Paul's Cathedral to do with the Stock Exchange protests.

A wild looking homeless bloke turned up, stood on the Cathedral steps, and started spouting his opinions at the top of his voice.

At first, and quite understandably, the protestors, the tourists, the cathedral staff and passing stock exchange business men and women on their lunch break thought that this chap really ought to be in psychiatric care. Indeed a few said that to him, or words to that affect, not repeatable here in the pulpit.

But many listened a bit;

people have got used to protestors, deans and bishops giving their pennies worth from the steps in recent weeks.

But it immediately became clear to anyone who listened at all, that this bloke had something.

There was a charisma and authority about him, and although bluntly spoken, what he said, well, it just seemed right, true.

One stock exchange trader who had stopped to listen said of it afterwards, 'It was an odd experience having a dishevelled man wagging his finger at me and saying challenging things and yet finding myself captivated.

He'd hit a nerve in me and I knew it was the truth.

He was beginning to gather a crowd, but it was like he was saying it just to me.

He asked what I was really living for?

He told me that my life was an unfulfilling never-ending mouse wheel.

He told me that I was worth a fortune and yet emotionally and spiritually bankrupt.

He said that me and my type had taken wrong paths over the past few decades and got ourselves really lost.

We'd lost any sense of vocation,

any sense of responsibility for the welfare of our employees further down the ladder.

He asked me when money had become my master rather than my servant?

I was lost for an answer but I immediately knew it was the truth.

I was overwhelmed and just needed time to take it in.'

Amongst the crowd now there were also some cathedral staff and the odd dog collar as well.

They had been looking pleased with what they heard and there were a few nodding heads and smug smiles at this eccentric preacher's words.

To my great delighted his focus then shifted from us suits in the crowd to the religious folk.

He'd caught their self-satisfied looks.

The dishevelled man eye-balled them and shouted, 'Shame on you'!

We all flinched.

You've taken your eye off the ball.

You have been like shepherds, fighting amongst themselves and paid no attention as the folk wandered aimlessly away into the mouths of wolves.

You were called to care for Gods' sheep,

but you have been consumed by your tribal disputes and forgotten your calling.

The nation has made money its idol and is now being devoured by its god, and you've said and done so little.

Why haven't you guided God's sheep to the green spiritual pastures?

Why aren't you angry that many of God's children are living in abject poverty?

Repent, make a fresh start; you have failed your calling!

...some of the religious folk looked furious, others ashamed.

One of the cathedral staff got his mobile out and called the City of London police.

He'd heard enough.

You can't going saying things like that on the cathedral steps; this is a holy place and a national treasure.

We can't have this nutter disturbing the pilgrims!

The tent dwelling protestors had loved every word of it.

The preachers stinging words were punctuated by cheers and clapping and laughing at those of us who knew it was true and knew that it was time for a change of direction in our lives.

How is it that this physically unattractive, unkempt man can be so damning and yet we are staying and listening and yet more are stopping to see what's going on and listening?

Maybe it's his eyes?

I see compassion, almost tears amongst the passionate words.

One of the protestors proudly hoists higher his, 'What would Jesus do?' banner. That was a mistake.

John, that's as it turns out, his name.

John turns on the banner holder and says, 'You're asking the wrong question'.

The smiles disappear...

The question for you and everyone here is,

'What would Jesus want you to do?'

Jesus turned this world upside down,
he walked on water,

he taught in a way that you and I will never do,
and then he got murdered for his efforts.
You and I aren't worthy to untie his shoes,
never mind thinking we know the mind of God.
But what does Jesus ask you to do?
You protestors have seen injustice and rightly named it.
But look at your own heart.
You too have lived the dream, have loved money.
Your passion is born as much of jealousy and it is of the injustice.
And why have you vilified a few senior bankers whilst ignoring the fact that the
whole nation has made wealth its god and is now bankrupt?
You have shone a light on the cheating scales.
Now it's time to look at yourself.
You have a proper home, so give your tent to someone without one.
Give to those who have less than you.
Continue to challenge the system but pray for the rich;
they are as lost as you are.

By this time John had had a go at just about everyone.
An assortment of suits, religious folk and protestors had stormed off looking
angry.
But loads of us had stayed.
How is it that someone can be so critical and yet we're drawn to them and what
they say?
There was silence for a little while,
and then someone asked what we'd all been thinking,
but hadn't said for fear of drawing attention to ourselves,
'So what do we do now then?'
John paused, or was he praying?
Then a smile came on his face, chuckled and said,
you need to die to your way of living and start again.
You need to get yourself ready for Jesus' arrival.
Are you ready to do this now, he asked.
I furtively nodded and looked around;
to my amazement I saw loads of nodding heads
This bloke had such magnetism; he was like the pied piper!
You're not going to believe what I let him do to me next.
We all followed him down to the bank of the Thames,
and he dunked us under the water one after another.
Can you believe that?
It was bloody freezing! You should see the state of my suit!
What am I going to say to my colleagues when I go back in the office now after a
3 hour lunch break?
I don't really care!
I'm walking a new path in life; dancing to a different drum.
I can tell you though, never had a hot air dryer in a gent's toilet been so valued.

And that dear friends is roughly the story of John the Baptist whose message and ministry we celebrate today.

He was an utter one-off; he was probably as weird looking as you could be, living rough in the wilderness with clothes made out of camel hair, and yet he pulled huge crowds, challenged everyone, especially those with privileged and power, to change what they were living for, and amazingly, people did.

And he dunked them under the waters of the Jordon to symbolise that cleansing fresh start.

And Jesus too joined the line of pilgrims waiting to be dunked.

Our nation and our world could really do with a prophet or two like John these days.

We are like lost sheep.

Let us pray for the shepherd to come to us and our struggling world.

Amen

11th December 2011