

Heaven is near

Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12

“Enter John the Baptist. John is a bruiser, a spiritual heavyweight in the best traditions of the prophets of Israel – ‘the voice crying in the wilderness’. For ‘crying’ substitute ‘shouting’. Shouting usually implies a measure of complaint or warning. Our parents shouted at us when we wouldn’t get out of our beds in the morning, our teachers shouted at us when we were being noisy or dim. We’ve all heard the words, ‘Look out!’ ring in our ears. John shouts because he has a complaint to make and a warning to give.

Everything about him suggests a single-minded devotion. He makes his home in the desert so that he won’t be seduced by the pleasures and distractions of town and city. His dress, echoing that of his predecessor Elijah, is a dress of rude simplicity. His minimalist diet, like a permanent detox regime, is the food of one for whom meat and drink are a distraction; he knows that his real food and drink are to carry out the mission God has given him. Out of the margins of society he comes, a loud voice shouting his complaints and warnings to any of his contemporaries who will hear.”ⁱ

His complaint, that the people of his day had strayed far from the kingdom of heaven, and from the ways of God. John starts his shout with the word, ‘Repent!’ It means, ‘Turn around, people!’ It challenges those who hear it to take a long, hard look at their lives, their country, their world, their faith, and ask the question, ‘Is this how it is meant to be?’

John then goes on to say, ‘the kingdom of heaven has come near.’

It’s a reference to Jesus, of course. But it’s also a reference to what Jesus comes to represent. A world based on fairness and opportunities for all. A world where there should be healing and welcome, hope and housing, peace and hospitality for everyone. A community of welcome, reconciliation and sharing that respects the human dignity of the poor, of women, of foreigners, of children, of all. A world where life is led with eyes focussed on the world in which we live, but

our ears cocked for the whispering of God who says to us, 'But what about this? Can you help here? Can you do something here? Can you make a difference here?'

The nearness of God's kingdom is not a future aspiration, it is a present day reality. It is not a realised fact, it is a worked-towards hope.

I have had cause to reflect this week on two wonderful events in the recent life of our congregation. One was the Harvest Thanksgiving event where quarter of a ton of provisions was gathered by the congregation and given to a local food bank. The other is today: with the provision of gifts for the Disabled Men's Club, and the donation of clothes for the Edinburgh Clothing Store. It's humbling and heart-warming to see this. It is beyond wonderful that people are so consistently kind and generous in this way.

And then, whilst our eyes fix on the needs that are being met in this way, our ears pick up the whispering of God. "Is this how the world is supposed to be?" Not a criticism of the responding to that need which has been done magnificently, but the fact that people, in the C21st, in our country, in our city, have to use foodbanks and clothing stores to help make ends meet. In 2009, the Trussell Trust gave food to 41,000 people in the UK, 14,000 of which were children. Last year, that figure was 1,583,668, over half a million of which were children. The Trussell Trust's food bank network provided 823,145 emergency food parcels to people in crisis between April and September this year, a 23% increase on the same period last year. 'Heaven is near'?

Turning round to where God wants you to go, turning round to what God wants you to be is a key theme for Advent. There was something in John the Baptist's message that struck a chord with the people of his day. It addressed people's personal lives and also the life of their nation. Israel-Palestine was desperate in those days. People lived in fear, oppression, and poverty. Many wanted something more, and it wasn't simply the 'material' more, it was something more profound. They flocked to the River Jordan for baptism, the River that for centuries had been a living symbol of God's promises and the people's freedom.

Who are today's prophets, and where do we hear the call of God to us to repent, to consider and change our way of life? How near is heaven, and what do we need it to be?

The lists of changes in our society are long. Struggles against injustice and discrimination. Issues around the treatment of women and minorities continue. The Peace Movement and the Ecology Movement rightly demand our attention and our response. The grimness of a secular society that seeks to fill the gaping hole at its centre that was once filled with faith and now filled with material goods. The Church of Scotland's too needs to face this time for radical action not only in its structures but in its attitude. The need to change and adapt and evolve has rarely been more pressing.

Heaven is near, John shouts, but do we see it, do we hear him? Heaven's proximity is not going to be marked by shafts of sunlight through the parted clouds above our heads, and choirs of angels singing. Heaven's proximity is near when we, at every level of our lives from the personal to the global embrace worlds without walls, longer tables of hospitality, and working towards the common weal in city, country, world and church. Public services which are valued, fair, adaptable and fully resourced need selfless and creative thought, attention and sustained commitment. These are not questions just for politicians but for all concerned with civic society and our nation's place on the world stage.

And these things also speak to the way we, as individual Christians, respond to the needs of our church and our parish. There is an agenda which we need to wrestle with about how we can be a better and truly open church, a church in, of and for the community.

We have no timescale. The needs will change from year to year, maybe even month to month and day to day. But how we respond to those needs, as best we are able, will tell us just how near heaven is. Not simply a place, but a state of mind and an attitude of heart. Not simply words and thoughts, but actions and commitment.

At the Advent reflection meeting in the manse last week we wondered about what kind of manifesto we would want to put our names to in this time of General Election. For a world where every child had every opportunity and encouragement to achieve the best they were capable of being. For a country with affordable housing. For educational opportunities for people whatever their age, those coming straight from school, and those who felt they'd missed the boat but were

able to catch up as adults. For a National Health Service and social care service that met the needs swiftly and fairly for all who had needs. For communities that looked out for each other. For churches where volunteers came forward at the first time of asking, and people who said they would do something committed to doing it. For leaders who spoke and lived with integrity and truthfulness. For a sense of hope to work towards.

My God! Heaven would be near!

Hear the voice of God in the shout of John the Baptist. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

Don't wait for it, work for it. Don't wring your hands in despair, but unfold them from your prayers, and put them to work for good.

On 19th May in 1780 there was an unusual darkening over the sky in the north eastern states of America. The darkness was so complete that candles were required from noon onwards. Some thought it was the Day of Judgement, and politicians in the Connecticut Senate called for an immediate suspension of business. One member of the Governor's Council, Abraham Davenport, said this: "I am against adjournment. The day of judgment is either approaching, or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for an adjournment; if it is, I choose to be found doing my duty. I wish therefore that candles may be brought."

Advent begins in darkness. A voice calls in the wilderness to turn around, and look for the nearness of heaven. Call for more candles, and work to help those in need. Then heaven will be found all around. Even in Morningside!

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

i Leith Fisher, 'But I say to you', p23