

Sunday 14 December – Third Sunday of Advent

Sermon by Reverend Canon Sebastian Harries

This week Archdeacon Ruth Patten is preaching at St. Luke's. An audio recording of the sermon will be available after the service at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](https://sermons(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk)).

Instead, the sermon from Chelmsford Cathedral is shown below. This can be heard at chelmsford.anglican.org/publications/weekly-sermons/weekly-sermon-for-the-third-sunday-of-advent-with-the-revd-canon-sebastian-harries

Today is all about the drama of John the Baptist... or is it?

John the Baptist is a dramatic figure: a figure of strength, a true prophet of old, one whose voice cuts through the mess and the nonsense of this world, one who speaks truth to power, and thus pays with his life, because the powerful leaders cannot bear to be called out.

Advent, is a dramatic season of the church year, with wonderfully powerful readings and music, which reflect themes about the end of times, anticipation, promises and prophecies being fulfilled, the history of the world, being changed forever.

It's a rich mix, with a message that is so crucial to the world today: to stay focussed on God's way, and not to be overcome by the dramas of the world around us. In a world facing wars and an environmental crisis that have arisen because of human greed, ignorance and stubbornness, wars and environmental catastrophe that threatens us with ecological collapse and the end of the world as we know it, possibly in our own life time; in a political landscape that is dominated by dishonesty, lies, abuse of trust and power, and seeks to stoke divisions in society rather than bring people together, humanity desperately needs to be reminded of what John the Baptist's message was about.

So today, the third Sunday in Advent in this dramatic mix, and as we move ever closer to the celebrating Christ's Coming – God with us; John's message points us to two important things: to rejoice, and to challenge.

In what can we rejoice?

The words from Isaiah give us a wonderful image of life with God being one that is transformative, and that God come to aid those who are afflicted. But it's a message about future hope, rather than present reality. However, this future hope can still be the cause of our rejoicing now: rejoicing that amidst the hardships and harshness of this world – God has promised consolation. We may not know what this will look like, or when it will be, but the promise itself is enough on its own.

But rejoicing comes with a caution - Rejoice! But don't get carried away – for in our second reading, we are warned not to get ahead of ourselves as we eagerly anticipate Christ's coming. Be patient. Be patient. Look to the prophets as an example. They suffered, yet held firm.

Last Sunday, the second Sunday of Advent, in our Gospel reading we had our first instalment of a drama where John the Baptist takes centre stage, boldly and confidently proclaiming the coming of God's Kingdom, the coming of Jesus. Crowds flock to him in the desert. His preaching is forceful, direct, as befits a prophet. The sense of his strength is palpable.

This week we have the second instalment, several chapters on in Matthew's account. Here, John the Baptist cuts a very different figure.

Today we he seems to be doubting, or questioning.

At this point in the drama, he is a political prisoner. John has been arrested for speaking out against Herod Antipas, the son of the King Herod we'll hear a lot more about in the Christmas story.

Imprisoned, and alone, John seems to doubt, because Jesus's deeds seem to be different from what John had proclaimed they would be. And so he sends his messengers to Jesus, to find out the truth.

Who was John doubting? Jesus? Or perhaps himself.

But John's doubt leads points us to the truth - in this he points us to how we can cope with doubt, especially the doubt that things will get better for this world in our lifetime, the doubts we can have in our faith because of the horrific things we see in the world around us.

Yet we see that it is because of his challenges and his doubt, or his questioning, we Jesus affirm that John truly is a prophet, and thus we see both John and Jesus for who they really are: the one who points to the Way, and the one who *is* the Way.

We see this as Jesus does not answer John's disciples directly but quotes Isaiah (29:18, 35:5, 42:18, 61:1) to show who he is, something that the writer of Matthew emphasises throughout his Gospel: that Jesus is the Messiah promised in the Old Testament. But what we also see is that Jesus does not reproach John for having doubts: he merely instructs John's disciples to tell go back and tell him what they see Jesus do: that Jesus' deeds speak for themselves.

So Jesus and John's actions point us to important truths about how we can live out our faith in the midst of troubled times.

We must challenge the injustice and the greed of the world around us: we must speak truth to the political powers that be, however hard that may be. As they did, we must act with honesty and integrity. We must keep questioning, but remain faithful and questioning will lead us to that deeper truth of God being revealed with us. Above all, in all the face of the horrors of the world – never allow ourselves to be overcome, or to forget to rejoice in God and in the hope we are promised.

So today is indeed about the drama of John the Baptist, but only really a drama because it reveals the truth of who Jesus is to us. The one who gives us cause to rejoice, but the one who reveals the world for what it truly is, a world that needs his redemption.