

## Advent 2 Year 1

John the Baptist had a vision of transformed individuals. Although he must have preached to thousands, he specifically directed his message to those who made up his congregation. Soldiers face the temptation to throw their weight about and to misuse their authority, especially in occupied territory, John told them to avoid violence, not to bring trumped up charges against innocent people, and not to make their wages up by squeezing money out of the weak. Corruption, falsifying the accounts and making a bit on the side, was always a temptation to the tax-gatherers, John told them to take only what was due to them. The besetting temptation of religious people is hypocrisy, fooling themselves and others that they are holier than they are, especially if they make their living from religion. John told them in brutal language to get rid of their illusions and to recognise that they were not as holy as they imagined. To everyone his message was to be generous, to share the good things they had with those less well off. Each person must have felt confronted and challenged. Yet to everyone he also offered a message of hope. *Repent*, he cried. Which doesn't mean beat your breast, wear sackcloth and ashes, but simply to change your mind and face the opposite direction, for there you will encounter a forgiving God and be transformed.

Isaiah's vision was that of a transformed society where predators live happily alongside their prey and children plays without danger of harm; a society at peace with itself where the violent are tamed, the timid are fortified and the helpless are protected. Although it mentions wolves, lambs, lions and calves, it is not about zoology, it is about a new age in which enmities will be forgotten, the strong will live peacefully with the weak, and the vulnerable will not be abused. This is not a vision of a society which has been tweaked around the edges to bring it into a little better shape, it is one where a fundamental change has taken place.

In the Epistle St Paul presents us with a vision of a transformed religion. The predominant Judaism of his day was inward-looking and exclusive, one which had little concern with the world at large but was obsessed with its own internal affairs. The vast majority of humanity, the gentiles, was excluded, they were the untouchables, feared lest they might corrupt a pure and holy religion and despised because they could not share in the blessings which that religion promised. Paul believed - and in himself personified - that Jesus, descended from ancient and honoured Jewish stock, offered the opportunity to radically transform all that within a church which would be open, welcoming, not exclusive but inclusive.

I can, however, imagine someone muttering, *Isaiah had his vision milleniums ago and yet we still sing:*

*Thy kingdom come, O God, Thy rule, O Christ, begin;  
Break with thine iron rod the tyranny of sin.*

The same applies to the vision of an open, inclusive Church. If history is anything to go by we Christians could teach the Pharisees a thing or two about discrimination. The Church has not been behind the door when it comes to religious, social and sexual intolerance.

So what is the point of reminding us of these transforming but unfulfilled visions?

I think it is that they save us from becoming complacent. They give us a God's-eye glimpse of a society and a Church which differ fundamentally from the society in which we live and often of the church in which we worship. If politicians keep Isaiah's vision before them, they will never fool themselves they are living in the best of all possible worlds or that they are offering the best of all possible manifestos. Whatever Utopia a political party offers it falls far short of God's ideal. At a recent lunch party the conversation turned to our still-new Archbishop Justin. We all agreed he has proved an impressive choice. Except that someone added the qualification, *As long as he doesn't get involved in politics*. What such a remark really means is, *As long as he doesn't criticise my politics*. But one of the tasks of the Church is to stand over against the society in which it exists and to hold before it the standards which God demands. In recent years eminent churchmen, Anglicans and others, have incurred the wrath of politicians, Conservative and Labour, and that is how it should be. Thank God for turbulent priests.

It is also the Church's job to implement Paul's vision of an inclusive religion. One where there is no racial, gender or social discrimination, where there is neither Jew nor Gentile, man or woman, slave or free, but all are one in Christ. And thank God we have an Archbishop who is helping to drag our staid old Church screaming into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and the Roman Catholics have a Pope in Francis who is attempting to do the same. But there is a long, long way to go before we see Paul's vision fulfilled.

But what about the Baptist's vision? Unlike those of Isaiah and Paul, John's has time and again been fulfilled. History is studded with the stories of men and women who, encountering Jesus, have had their lives transformed. Some by a dramatic conversion, others by the steady discipline of seeking to live a life of quiet, unassuming goodness.

Over sixty years ago I read *The Transforming Friendship*, a collection of

sermons by the Methodist minister, Leslie Weatherhead. I still remember an incident he records. He was in Liverpool on a grey, murky November day and his spirits were as gloomy as the streets through which he walked for he was on his way to visit his beloved sister who was in hospital with terminal cancer. *Yet*, he wrote, *when I entered her room it was as if someone had turned on a bright light*. It was a room radiant with joy, serenity and hope.

She was not alone in this. There are many who have experienced the same calm and quiet hope in the face of death and other adversities, and many, having observed such grace, have themselves been drawn to its transforming source, Jesus Christ.

Isaiah's and Paul's visions have yet to be fulfilled, but John's sermon, thank God, is still active, still pointing us to the transforming friend who takes away the sins of the world, gives beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning and the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.