



The Church of England
in Essex and East London

Diocese of Chelmsford

The Third Sunday of Advent

Gaudete Sunday

15th December 2024

Philippians 4:4-7

Luke 3:7-18

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Braintree Area Dean

As I was watching Strictly Come Dancing the other night, I was struck by just how famous the experts/judges are. In many cases, far more than the stars taking part. Then my thoughts took me to reflecting on just how many TV experts there are these days, because they seem to be everywhere, from dancing to pottery, baking to sewing. They are ready with put downs, one liners and expert critique. I am sure this is just as true of the radio, or other forms of media, as we seem to want to be guided by these experts.

Craig Revel Horwood, Paul Hollywood, Simon Cowell and so on, with phrases that can be more famous than them. Fab-u-lous, to a Hollywood handshake!

Some 2000yrs ago in the area surrounding the River Jordan, when you were hoping for answers, and looking for an expert, you went to see to the desert to hear from a prophet, like John the Baptist, where he would dish out some advice and expertise. In the gospel passage set for this Sunday from Luke 3 we hear one of John's catchphrases 'You brood of vipers', followed up with more advice, as both the crowds and the soldiers were heard asking, what should we do?

People wanted answers, they were also intrigued to hear from this man, and afterwards many were baptised. John's ministry was indeed a powerful one bringing many to start a journey of faith.

However, to the people then, and similarly for us today, John has become a caricature, much like the TV experts I mentioned earlier, surely Craig isn't mean all the time, to prove it he did lend me his 10 paddle!

John the Baptist though was thought of as strange, wandering the wilderness with very little to live by. It is in Matthew 3 that we hear of John that his clothes were made of camel's hair and he ate locusts and wild honey. He didn't really interact with people, but they were also intrigued by him, wondering as we heard in this passage, could he be the Messiah? Certainly, his expert answers were making them think so, as he spoke with authority about God.

John didn't appear to let being a caricature bother him, although at times it must have a little, He remained set on his goal, to proclaim the good news and to signpost on from himself and point people towards God. His words were sobering, thought provoking but also very clear. Repent, the time is now.

I don't know about you but there have been plenty of times when I have asked myself the question of the crowd and soldiers, what should I do? Times when you don't feel able to turn to anyone else, times when others just don't know all the details and you don't want to start the story again, and we are left thinking what should I do?

During that time, we can feel really quite lost, and it struck me that we often think about the wilderness as a place we go to. Certainly, John the Baptist spent a long time in that place, in the wilderness, but actually for us when we are lost, unsure, feel isolated, cut off from so much and asking what should I do, we are already in that wilderness place.

So why this story and this message for us today? Well as we know it is Advent 3, the rose-coloured candle and it also has a special name, Gaudete Sunday. In any penitential season for the church, Advent, like Lent has a week that is slightly less penitential, a little more joyful and hopeful.

A timely reminder for us then that when we feel lost and questioning what next that we do already have a guide, an expert, a teacher who can help. We don't have John the Baptist, but God is here. That Christmas story we are preparing to tell again reminds us that everything changed, everything about this world, and our relationship with God that very first Christmas.

God came to be with us, Emmanuel, meaning God with us. No longer far off but here. God's son, that infant child that brings joy, hope and light. Yes later in his ministry he would ascend to be with his Father, but he sent the Holy Spirit to be with us, so that we are not alone, and promising himself to return one day.

You may have noticed there is one problem with all experts in our world today and that is we don't listen, we have rejected experts!

Could it be possible that we also miss God's guidance, that we reject the guiding hand that is on offer. That we turn away from the answers to our questions of what should we do, because we don't like the answers! I think we know the answer to that one.

So, as we continue our Advent journey, as we seek to be better disciples, as we seek to find answers in the world and in our own wilderness, let us turn to God for those much-needed answers, let him respond to what should we do?

I'm afraid we won't find him on our TV screens waving paddles with numbers, but you will find him in your heart, with you now and always, walking the journey that lies ahead. He even has some pretty good catch phrases, love one another?

So let us find the courage to see and listen for God at work in our lives. Let him, the expert, be our sure guide. We can be sure that if we do the outcome for our life and those around us, will be nothing less than a-ma-zing! Amen.