

Today, the third Sunday in Advent is still known among older Anglicans as "STIR UP SUNDAY".

This title goes back to the 1662 Prayer Book and Archbishop Cranmer's majestic collect for the day which begins:

"Stir up we beseech thee, the wills of thy faithful people".

On a less pious note this day was also known as "Stir up Sunday" for culinary reasons.

Because in the age before Tesco and Sainsbury's, old fashioned cooks like my grandmother used to stir up their homemade Christmas puddings on the Sunday two weeks before December 25. It was a family ritual which caused great anticipatory excitement to her grandson!

Now this same theme of anticipation fits well with our reading from Matthew 11 which continues our series of reflections on the remarkable figure of John the Baptist who was stirring up the ancient people of Israel to expect the imminent coming of the Messiah.

But, as we shall see he got a rather mixed reception during that first Advent.

Our 21st century Advent is also a season of mixed receptions. For all around us in this run up to Christmas we can feel an invisible tug of war going on between:

- The secular and the spiritual
- Between Jingle Bells and Jesus
- Between commercial Christmas sales and the Holy Christmas message

As for the word 'stir' there is a certain ambivalence in it too.

Last Sunday Pete Winter gave us a splendidly stirring talk here in this church — literally so, because I noticed he used the verb stir in its spiritual sense well over 30 times in the first few minutes.

In our contemporary culture the word has rather more non-spiritual connotations from stir fry to James Bond liking his martinis 'stirred rather than shaken'.

Indeed as a personal memory I recall that the most exciting girlfriend of my youth used to keep in her bedroom a 6ft high wooden spoon on which was inscribed in gold lettering the words "WORLD'S GREATEST STIRRER".

Well she certainly stirred me — because, I married her!

Happily as my wife Elizabeth she is in this church today now recovering well after a long stay in hospital, having been steadfastly supported for months by the prayers of the HTB community- answered prayers for which she and I are deeply grateful.

As such examples show there can be great stirrings in human lives but none of them are anything like as important as those of John the Baptist.

So let's look at today's reading about him from three angles.

First, let's try to understand the historical and spiritual context in which John lived and preached.

Secondly, let's reflect on the human doubts of John the man and then the divinely authenticated power of John the messenger.

Thirdly, let's ponder on the meaning of John's message to our own lives this Advent.

John appears for the first time in the Gospel story in Matthew Chapter 3 as a mysterious,
rather disturbing,
yet compelling preacher.

He had a strange solitary lifestyle, living in the desert,
Eating locusts
dressing in way out gear of camel's hair
and leather,
and attracting huge crowds to come all the way out from Jerusalem to hear him and to be baptised.
He also told them the extraordinary news that the one who was coming after him was far greater.

"He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Matthew 3:11)

John was clearly having an enormous spiritual impact with his message.

But not everyone liked it.

That is why when our reading begins he is in prison.

Why was John the Baptist in prison? Because he was a fearless preacher denouncing wickedness whenever he saw it particularly among the Pharisees who he addressed "you brood of vipers!" (Matthew 3:7)

Even more audaciously he fiercely attacked the morals of the unsavoury ruler of Galilee Herod Antipas whose debauched court was an easy target.

For Herod had seduced the wife of his brother Philip, abducted her and married her. John the Baptist declared that this marriage of a divorced ruler to his sister-in-law was incestuous and unlawful.

Absolute rulers, then as now, don't like personalised criticism of their private lives.

So Herod reacted by doing what would probably be done today by the likes of Kim Jong-un of North Korea or Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe.

Herod had John the Baptist arrested and thrown into prison. He was incarcerated in the grim fortress of Machaerus in the burning mountains of the Dead Sea.

Now being in prison, as I well know, is an experience which:

- Magnifies anxieties
- Enlarges fears
- And increases doubts

And that may be why John began to doubt in his prison cell whether the new Galilean preacher, Jesus Christ was actually the real and long awaited Messiah.

Another reason for the doubts could have been that Jesus was not turning out to be the mighty, kingly, political Messiah that the Israelites had been expecting to arrive in glory to liberate them from foreign occupation.

This Jesus was spending his time ministering to humble ordinary people – particularly the sick and the poor. This was not what was expected of the powerful Messiah.

That's why, as verse 2 of our reading puts it:

“When John heard in prison what Christ was doing he sent his Disciples to ask him are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?”

This is not the confident voice of the John the Baptist we last saw in Matthew 3 at the start of the first advent baptizing Jesus in the River Jordan.

This is more like the querulous voice of a worried, doubting Thomas.

Now I know that last Sunday Pete Winter expressed his doubts as to whether John was actually having doubts. Well, we are in a church which on weekdays is a theological college. So where better for different preachers on consecutive Sundays to be allowed to express different theological interpretations of the same Biblical passage. Par for the course in Theology!

But let me explain my interpretation a little further. The next time I preach it will be on Christmas Day in the chapel of Britain's second highest security prison HMP Long Lartin.

Having done most of my own bird in Britain's highest security prison, HMP Belmarsh, I understand that environment.

So I know that on Christmas Day the HMP Long Lartin chapel will be full of:

- Self-doubters,
- God-doubters,
- Low self-esteemers,
- Despairers,
- And men more generally at the lowest point of their lives.

That's what imprisonment does to even the strongest souls.

That's why I find it so natural, so inevitable that doubts could have entered the mind of even John the Baptist in the dreaded dungeons of Machaerus. This was the dark side of the first Advent.

Yet curiously I find this a heartening aspect of the story.

For perhaps it is a small encouragement to anyone who is assailed by doubts when travelling on their spiritual journey to know that doubts have at times troubled even the greatest of God's followers and servants.

And to learn from them that examining ones doubts, confronting them and seeking reassurance about them can often be gateways to a deeper faith.

So John, perhaps temporarily John the doubting Baptist, sought reassurance from his prison cell.

The answer Jesus gave him was exceedingly profound, and relevant to many doubters.

We all know people who in times of despondency question the very existence of God. We may well have done this ourselves in our own heart with entreaties like:

"O Lord, if you are there, will you hear my prayer and ...

"O God, if you are God, please, please ...stop the suffering in Syria...or the bombings in Turkey...."

And the equivalent in John the Baptist's context was the anguished question:

"Are you the one?"

If we ever travel along such roads of honest doubt we must know that there is only one source of divine certainty who can answer us.

For only God can attest God.

And the answers to such questions when they are given by God comes to us in one of two ways.

He either answers us through his word, often by the fulfilment of his word from the Biblical Scriptures.

Or he answers us by his power, experienced in our lives or the lives of others, and by the display of his power in signs and miracles.

So when the disciples of John came to ask their master's question: "Are you the one?"

Jesus responds with the double whammy of both those types of divine answers.

For he replies:

“Go back and report to John what you hear and see.”

“The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the deaf hear and the good news is being preached”.

These words taken from verse 5 of our reading would have resonated profoundly with John in his prison cell.

Because as he would have known they are paraphrased quotes from two famous passages in the Old Testament (Isaiah 35 and 61) which were widely believed to be Messianic prophecies.

So when Jesus quoted them to him, John was in effect being told that Scripture was being fulfilled by these signs from the One True Messiah, Israel had been waiting for.

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Then as now, signs of God’s power are often veiled signs.

They can stimulate belief but rarely compel it for there are always alternative explanations.

Yet to those who are willing to accept veiled signs they are all around us today.

To give one example of a 21st century sign right here on our doorstep let’s reflect for a moment on the signs from St Mellitus as it approaches its 10th Anniversary.

A decade ago St Mellitus did not exist and this now thriving building was a desolate and largely empty space known to us local residents as the "Sad Church" because it had no life and virtually no congregation.

At this time I had a ringside seat at the birth of St Mellitus because I am a former pupil, friend and prayer partner of Graham Tomlin's, the founder Dean of St Mellitus and as you all know now Bishop Graham, and President of the college.

I don't think I ever heard Graham voice any doubts about his project, but he certainly knew back in those days that he was facing an enormous and highly uncertain challenge of starting a new Christian Theological College. It was a high risk enterprise.

For many voices in the church were dismissive of the idea that a new Theological college was needed at all, arguing that the market place for ordination candidates was already over provided.

So if not mission impossible, the creation of St Mellitus was certainly mission extremely difficult.

But many prayers were being said for it. Being in a home group with Graham, I remember so well how we often used to pray along the lines of "Oh Lord please let the number of ordination candidates applying to St Mellitus increase next term from 6 to 10 or from 10 to 12.

Well what an answer to prayer was given!

Who except God could have made St Mellitus the largest and most successful Theological College in Britain?

St Mellitus now has a record breaking 220 students training here for Ordination.

And with branches springing up in other parts of the country and the world, it is revolutionising the training of candidates for ordination.

Praise the Lord for the St Mellitus story is surely a reminder that God's signs can still be given to us today.

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In both the spiritual and secular worlds, messengers who proclaim signs of coming change, are often disconcerting figures.

And that was certainly true of the greatest messenger of them all — John the Baptist.

I call him that because in verse 11 of our reading Jesus gives John an amazing eulogy of endorsement:

"I tell you the truth" he says "Among those born of women there is not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist" (Matthew 11:11).

No mortal human being ever received such commendation as Jesus bestows with these words on his friend in prison.

But why?

First John was the key bridge builder between Old Testament tradition going back 500 years from the prophecies of Malachi and Isaiah which John now linked so powerfully with the coming Christian Gospel and the coming of the Messiah.

John was the uncomfortable, uncompromising messenger prophesied in Malachi 3:1.

He was no "reed swayed by the wind"

He was no establishment patsy dressing up in posh clothes and fine silk raiment of courtiers.

Far from it. He was the courageous voice of conscience confronting the Court of Herod, upsetting its amoral lady courtiers so badly that at the prompting of Herod's incestuous wife Herodias and her dancing girl daughter Salomé John was soon to be brutally beheaded.

But 2 years before his martyrdom, and this may be the second and even more important reason why Jesus endorsed him, John was preaching the first and most fundamental message of the good news that was breaking into the world of the first Advent

In John's unforgettable words he told the crowds:

"Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near" (Matthew 3:2)

Does this cry from the banks of the River Jordan 21 centuries ago have any meaning for us today?

In our modern world it is difficult to think of a harder sell than the call to repentance in the run up to secular Christmas, particularly perhaps here in prosperous, self-satisfied South Kensington.

No more popping of the Champagne corks.

Hold back on the mulled wine and mince pies!

No flirting at office parties!

No second helpings of Xmas puddings!

No overspending or overindulging!

Who wants to hear this sort of killjoy message at the peak of the festive season?

But before we get unnecessarily gloomy about reducing our enjoyment of Christmas, let's have a closer look at what John really meant by his call to repentance.

For there's a linguistic conundrum here which needs to be unravelled.

Usually I have an aversion to preachers who show off their knowledge of New Testament Greek but perhaps you may feel that the word Repent in this reading is the exception that proves the rule.

The trouble is that the word Repent in English has all sorts of negative connotation such as:

Saying sorry over and over again

Standing in the corner

Writing out 100 lines

Or in the old days

Wearing sackcloth and ashes and doing penances.

But in the original language which the Gospels were written, Greek, the word for Repentance is Metanoia which translates more positively to:

Meta= Change

Noia= Of mind

And the simple imperative verb, in Greek a strong vigorous command here is:

Mete = Change!

John urged his audience to change because of the good news that Jesus Christ was coming. That is a positive, hopeful, joyful message of change. So how now should we respond to it today?

By change, John of course meant timeless spiritual change within human hearts.

Of course in temporal affairs, the times they are always a changin' – as 2016 so vividly demonstrates by Brexit, by President elect Trump's victory, and by the many upheavals and uncertainties in European and the Middle East.

And it's quite possible that we ain't seen nothing yet in terms of economic and political storms.

But the volatility of earthly change may serve as a reminder that more than ever we need the eternal anchor of God's love and the protection of God's everlasting arms around us.

Which brings us back in conclusion to some words of John the Baptist which went even deeper than his initial exhortation of "Change!"

Just after he had issued his first call to repent or change because the Kingdom of Heaven was coming John also said this five verses further on in Matthew Chapter 3 he urged the crowds in the desert to:

"Produce fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matthew 3:8)

In plain language: If God's changing you – show it.

Show it, not only with our lips but in our lives.

* * *

I've been busy with my lips this morning but I know that all the church talks and sermons in the world about spiritual change, including this one, are ephemeral and marginal compared to the power of individual examples of Christ-centred change.

Let me tell you a small story about this:

17 years ago I was a member of a prison prayer group in Advent 1999. And I remember as vividly as if it was yesterday how strange signs of change began to surface among our assembled weekly group of prayer givers and Bible readers which consisted of:

- burglars,
- armed robbers,
- perjurers,
- pickpockets
- fraudsters
- arsonists
- and murderers.

Between us we probably gave an original new meaning to the Christian term
– a cell group!

Yet because of our groups' prayers, fellowship and Bible studies, some of us
were on a journey of changing and believing the good news.

And I'll always remember how certain young prisoners in this group:

- Stopped swearing
- Threw away their porn magazines
- Became civil to prison officers
- Said 'No' to the prison drug pushers
- Extended the hand of friendship and kindness to the vulnerable prisoners on the wing
- And began to speak openly about the power of the Holy Spirit in changing their lives.

This may not sound a big deal in respectable Courtfield Gardens, but I assure you in unrespectable Belmarsh Prison this really was fruit being produced in keeping with repentance or spiritual change.

Now because the linkage here may not seem entirely obvious, I hope it will not offend anyone if I dare to suggest that the Courtfield Gardens Club and the Belmarsh Prison Club have one or two surprising things in common.

Speaking as probably the only one present who has been a member of both Clubs both the Courtfield Gardens set and the Belmarsh Prison set are full of people who are rather firmly fixed in their ways. The both contain many people who are resistant to going on challenging journeys of spiritual change.

Of course both contain sinners – those who have been caught and those who have not been caught.

And both clubs contain some people who are rather puffed up with their own egos.

Now neither club will get very far in producing fruit, in keeping with change, unless we follow the second great suggestion for change in John the Baptist.

This second suggestion from John the Baptist deals brilliantly with peoples whose egos can be an obstacle to their spiritual growth.

John was speaking before he was thrown into prison. Before he was having those doubts. He seemed to be rather on a high – giving testimony about Jesus.

For having baptised Jesus and having announced the coming of his Kingdom, John said “My joy is now complete”.

And then he checked himself and said (John 4:30) as if signposting the way ahead for his life and for all Christian lives “He (Jesus) must become greater. I must become less.”

So if we are serious about changing our lives this Advent the first step is that we should follow John's teaching and example and become less as we look forward to the coming of the far greater one.

This is perhaps John's most important message today. For the most crucial journey of life consists of travelling on the path away from self-centredness and towards God-centredness.

We have to surrender our wills to His will.

We have to become less so that within our hearts he becomes greater. There is no better or more prayerful preparation for God's coming this Advent.

So let us bow our heads and pray.

So returning where we began, with Cranmer's Collect for the third Sunday in Advent.

"Stir up we beseech thee the wills of thy faithful people"

Oh Lord May we stir up our wills to learn from John the Baptist's example and teachings to change and to show fruits of our change.

May we become less so that our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ may become greater—in our hearts and in our world this Advent. For his names sake.

Amen