

Fertile ground for baptism.

It's the second Sunday of Advent, traditionally associated with John the Baptist, and therefore a perfect setting for the baptisms that took place earlier. Our reading from Matthew's Gospel earlier presents us with a picture of this wild and unkempt figure out in the wilderness proclaiming a very uncompromising message, and people flocking to hear him. These people evidently had to get up and move to listen to John. They had to get up and go if they wanted to hear him. They had to leave their homes and journey into the desert, and clearly they did, in their droves. They flocked to him from Jerusalem, from Judea and from the Jordan valley – from miles around. And you can't help wondering why. Why did they come? What prompted them? Some of them, after all, came all that way just to receive an ear-bashing. So here come those known as Pharisees, and also the Sadducees, queuing up for baptism, and you would have thought that John would be pleased to see them. Significantly, Pharisees and Sadducees represented two very different theological positions, and two different politics. So John is clearly reaching out across great theological and political divisions in attracting both parties, and you would think therefore that John would welcome them and affirm them. But not a bit of it. As far as John concerned they are all just 'a brood of vipers'. This is certainly no charm offensive by John, and gratuitously offending people is an unlikely way to attract them to your cause.

So what brought them out? What gave this great crowd the urge to go out and find this strange, austere figure and to submit to his baptism? Well, I would suggest that one reason would have been a deep sense of discontentment. Somewhere in the hearts of those who came there must have lurked an uneasy sense of disenchantment with the way things were, with the status quo, and a yearning for change. These crowds sensed that deep down things were out of sorts, that the world was somehow skewed and out of kilter, that people were heading in the wrong direction and therefore there had to be change.

So for a start there were economic pressures that people were living under. Life was not easy for peasant farmers, dependent as they were upon landlords who inhabited the world of large cosmopolitan cities and who were often absent, leaving their tenants to groan under the weight of taxation. And there were religious motives too for people to head out into the wilderness in search of change. In rural areas people often felt alienated from the main religious centre of Jerusalem with its leaders and their links to the occupying power of Rome. Indeed it may well be that part of John's attraction was that his baptism offered a way of dealing with sin without having to go to offer sacrifices at the temple. It was a way of getting close to God without having to submit to the temple's regulations and protocols. Certainly there were others who were disenchanted with life as it was and who headed out into the wilderness to seek an alternative. There was the community called Qumran situated near the Dead Sea, where nineteen centuries later, in 1945, what became known as the Dead Sea Scrolls were found, and indeed it is not impossible that John himself had belonged to that community - the Qumran community also took as a key text the verse from Isaiah that John quotes in his preaching, 'a voice cries in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord; clears a straight path before him.'

So - disillusionment. Disenchantment. Discontent with the status quo. This was fertile ground for baptism and so they flocked to John - though, of course, scratch the surface of each person who came and you would get different individual stories. Maybe some people had more personal reasons. Some were maybe caught in life's struggles and burdens and were desperate for change, for a fresh start. All manner of factors: personal, social, political, religious, might have driven people into the Judean wilderness to a rendezvous with this strange, fiery figure, this loud and abrasive prophet with his threats and his warnings and his message of repentance. John connected with a sense of disenchantment, disillusion, a yearning for change.

And here, perhaps, we might find a connection with today. As a 'Brit' I am of course very tuned to the General Election taking place right now in the UK, and one depressing feature of the current British social landscape is the cloud of discontent and disillusionment that is hanging over it

– a sense somehow that things are not working, that we are ill-at-ease and that somehow we are going wrong. Of course the great majority of us live more comfortable lives than previous generations did, but still there is a sense that somehow we should be doing better as a society. The UK, after all, is deeply divided: divided by Brexit but divided too by wealth and opportunity and privilege. So there is disillusionment and discontent: a sense not just that one or other political party is failing but the whole system is somehow bust and needs to change. And doubtless it has always been thus, but with every conceivable technological advance to help us today surely we should be doing better. With all our ‘progress’ you would think that there should be a greater realisation of the common good and of a nation at ease with itself. Well, that’s the UK – but it’s just a microcosm of the wider world. Look at the USA today. Look further afield to long-festering global conflicts that are simmering and being inflamed; consider the environmental threat; and of course there is such widespread cynicism about our leaders – be it the UK, or the USA, or France, or Iran, or Syria and so on and so on.

And as in John’s day, all this cashes out in personal stories. So take two of the people who were baptised this morning - and I have permission to share something of their stories and you can follow up afterwards by speaking to them directly. Take Ebrahim. Ebrahim is a political refugee from Iran, whose life was endangered by his courage as a whistle-blower, publicising governmental wrong doing and cover-up. And along with his opposition to the regime there was disillusionment too with the religion of the regime – in this case Islam. And it’s that kind of discontent that is fertile ground for baptism and after flirting with various other religions – mysticism, Bahai - here he is today, a Christian. Ebrahim’s whole life spells change and today baptism symbolises it.

So too with Emad. Emad was born and brought up a Muslim, but in his early twenties he became disheartened with Islam and abandoned all religion and effectively became an atheist. His faith had ceased to mean anything to him and he discarded it. But after a few years he felt an emptiness, a disillusionment with a world without God and faith. And that again was fertile ground for change, choosing not to return to the religion of his childhood but to Christianity – largely because of kindness shown to him by Christians in a time of need.

These are exactly the factors - political, social, personal – that brought those in John’s day and others today to the waters of baptism: disillusionment and a yearning for change. And to those who flocked to John the message was all about change: ‘Repent!’ cried John. ‘Repent and bear fruit worthy of repentance!’ And what a mess the church has often made of that message of repentance. What a travesty. I wonder what you think of when you hear the word, ‘repent’? It probably has all sorts of associations of sin and guilt and judgement. I am such a loathsome sinner that I need to repent and changed. In other words, the call to repent is premised upon bad news: ‘you’re a sinner and you’re in trouble!’ But that wasn’t John’s message. Not at all! John’s message was ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!’ In other words the call to repentance is premised on good news: God is near! God is at hand! God has returned to God’s people after centuries of relative absence when Israel has been languishing. God is on the move, back in town! Things are about to change, so you need to get with it and change too! That’s a positive prompt to change. And yes, says John, if you don’t change disaster will befall you, as indeed happened to this entire region of Jerusalem and Judea some years later, in AD 70 with the sacking of Jerusalem by the Romans – because of Jewish rejection of the new thing that God was doing. And faced with our chaotic world today with its conflicts and divisions and especially our trashing of the planet we face potential disaster too, if we don’t change. But for Christians the prompt, the motive to change – as in John’s day - is not the threat of destruction, but rather the good news that God has made a move that demands a response.

One last point. God has made a decisive move. It demands a response – repentance, change. But that response begins with a community that lives it. Repentance begins in community - a community that is learning what it means to live with the one who John spoke of as Lord. It’s a community that is exploring together what changes are required of us if indeed God’s rule has come. It’s a community that is asking the question, what does it mean to repent? What does it mean to celebrate God’s rule in the world? The kingdom has to be embodied, enfolded, corporately as

we help one another to live it out. The stones in the desert from which John said that God could raise up children of Abraham are built into a living temple, the church.

That brings me to the last of our baptismal candidates this morning, Susan. Susan has been a Christian and attending various churches for years, but somehow along the way she never did get round to being baptised. Here in Amsterdam, however, she found this church community where she feels inclined to tie this loose thread, even though she is not here for so very long. I'm intrigued that you, Susan, did not feel particularly strongly motivated to be baptised until you found a community to which you felt you belonged. You remind us that baptism is not a private transaction between me and God: it is into a community that lives it out.

So thank God for the three of you. In a world every bit as torn and conflicted as that of John's day Ebrahim, Emad and Susan have born witness: witness to the change that has come with Christ, the change that is required of us. May your baptisms today be an encouragement to us all, as Christ's church, to live out the life of baptism together and to bear witness, as John did, to the one who has come. Amen.

O holy and loving God,
 We worship and praise you, Advent God,
 God who comes to us
 and is found amongst us.
 We praise you advent God,
 come amongst us in Jesus Christ,
 in the flesh of a baby.
 We praise you advent God,
 come amongst us in your Holy Spirit,
 your presence in us,
 who prompts and inspires us to worship.
 And we praise you Advent God
 who prepares for your coming in John the Baptist,
 with his call to repentance and to change.
 O God this morning we would join those
 who went out to hear John in the wilderness
 for we confess that our lives need change.
 We acknowledge those things which demand repentance,
 looking for your righteousness to embrace us.
 So we join in saying together...

O Advent God,
 come to us afresh today and meet us here in mercy and grace.
 Come to us that we may go in your strength,
 knowing ourselves to be loved and forgiven
 and ready to serve you in the world.
 We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen