

THE REVD JONATHAN AITKEN SERMON

Sunday 27 November



St Peter's Notting Hill

Kensington Park Road W11 2PN

Luke 3: 1-18

27 November 2022

Do you enjoy a good mystery story? If so fasten your seatbelts and harken to what is arguably the greatest mystery story in the history of the world.

The mystery of Advent – the mystery season of the coming of Christ.

Like many good mystery stories, this one begins – er – wellmysteriously!

Luke always a brilliant storyteller starts with a few vague and apparently unconnected clues.

Agatha Christie, had she been writing in the First Century AD could hardly have done better using her technique of sprinkling her opening chapters with unfamiliar names with unusual occupations in exotic locations.

None of them at first reading seem to have any linkage or connections. However, you won't need the sleuthing skills of Hercule Poirot or Miss Marple to work out the compelling eventually connecting narrative of this Advent mystery which has the added advantage over Agatha Christie novels of being a true story rooted in history.

The historical roots are alluded to in the opening verses of our reading.

Names like Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Annas and Caiaphas were real historical figures recorded in the writings of Roman historians like Josephus and Tacitus.

27 November 2022

So we can accurately sign post the date when the Advent Mystery Story began – in the 15th Year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar - or 29AD in the Gregorian calendar.

Yet even more mysteriously the story actually begins some five centuries years earlier with the astonishing prophetic utterance quoted in our reading. It comes from the 40th chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah of Jerusalem.

Now Isaiah's words are surprisingly well known, particularly here in Britain, to an audience far wider than the people who have read them in the Old Testament. Why? Because these verses form the opening of the libretto of Handel's *Messiah* George Frideric Handel who was surely England's greatest composer, wrote his legendary Oratorio here in London in the summer of 1741 at 25 Brook Street Mayfair a house, which has just been preserved as a museum.

Let me just digress for a moment on Handel's *Messiah* because, as I have just said, so many people know the words on our screen in verses 4–6 without realising that they come from the Bible or from Isaiah. What was the prophetic message here? It was that "a voice crying out in the wilderness" was going to be heard in order to "prepare the way of the Lord".

We'll come to that voice in a moment. He is the central character in today's instalment of our mystery story.

What is his voice going to say?

27 November 2022

Here we enter deep Mystic Meg or Mystic Isaiah pronouncements as in Handel's version Isaiah predicts that:

Every valley shall be exalted

And ev'ry mountain and hill made low

The crooked straight

And the rough places plain

...And all flesh shall see it together

When I first heard these words, I hadn't a clue who Isaiah was, who John the Baptist was, or what Advent was.

But nevertheless, I was tingling with excitement. That was because I was singing as a 10 year old choirboy in a memorable performance of the *Messiah* in Norwich Cathedral in December 1952 – six months before our late Queen's Coronation.

I can remember that performance of Handel's *Messiah* as if it were yesterday. The great Sir Malcolm Sargent was our conductor. We were a chorus of 250 voices drawn from choirs of churches all over Suffolk and Norfolk. And we had a line up of stellar soloists headed by Kathleen Ferrier whose recording that night of "*I Know That My Redeemer Liveth*" is still a classic.

Anyway I literally was trembling with excited anticipation as we got under way that evening in Norwich Cathedral. The voice of the opening tenor soloist, Richard Lewis, made the whelkin ring as he hit the high notes of the recitative about "A voice crying in the wilderness"

27 November 2022

And then we swung off into the magnificent opening choruses of "*And The Glory The Glory of The Lord*" and "*All flesh shall see it together*", climaxing with "*For Unto Us A Son Is Born, Unto Us A Son Is Given*"

Before I get too carried away with my choirboy's reminiscences of signing in my first *Messiah*, I will briefly lighten the mood by telling you Sir Malcolm Sargent's joke during rehearsals.

We were rehearsing "*Unto Us A Child Is Born*" It is started off by the Alto's who in our Norwich Cathedral chorus consisted mainly of matronly middled aged ladies

Sir Malcolm seemed underwhelmed by the rehearsal. So he tapped on the rostrum with this conductor's baton and said in his chipped, posh voice:

"My dear lady contraltos could we do the opening of '*Unto Us A Child Is Born*' again please. But this time kindly sing it with a little more reverence and a little less astonishment". Even a 10 year old could get that joke!

On the theme of astonishment, now let's get back to John the Baptist. He is the hero of our mystery story. The hero of Advent and the hero of Jesus who in a later passage in Matthew's Gospel (Matthew 11:11) declares:
I tell you the truth: "*Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist*"

If Jesus rated John the Baptist so high, we should today pay our highest attention to John and his message.

27 November 2022

Who was John the Baptist? He was born in the hardscrabble hill country of Judea in the same year as Jesus i.e. about 29 or 30AD. His parents were a poor elderly God fearing couple who are described in some detail in the first chapter of Luke's Gospel. They are both important characters in the mystery story Luke is telling us. John's father Zechariah was a priest.

One day when he was on duty in the sanctuary of the Temple burning incense at the altar, an angel appeared to him and completely spooked poor old Zachariah who was terrified: "Do not be afraid" said the angel.

These three Godly words are repeated again and again throughout the Gospels.

We need to listen to them in our 21st century lives when even our earthly pressures, anxieties and fears are piling up and we need Gods calming guidance.

"Do not be afraid." But Zechariah remained afraid. And when the angel made the amazing announcement that God had answered the prayers of Zechariah and his wife Elisabeth – a childless couple – and was about to give them a son – instead of saying 'Hallelujah Thank You God' Zechariah didn't believe the angel. In a sceptical, querulous, unbelieving response Zechariah said to the angel: "How can this happen? For I am an old man and my wife is getting on in years?"

The angel then got rather testy with Zechariah because of his disbelief.

But before he disappeared the angel told Zechariah that he must call the baby John and that John would be "great in the sight of the Lord".

27 November 2022

After that the angel added these momentous but mysterious words about John: "Even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit".

Now of all the clues in this first instalment of Luke's Advent mystery story, far and away the most important is this baffling first mention of the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps it may not be seen all that baffling to many of you. For St Peter's is a spirit-filled church. We talk a lot about the Holy Spirit and his power and his presence in our 21st century lives.

But back in the 1st century, the Holy Spirit was an almost unknown figure. In the books of the Old Testament and the 3,000 years of Israelite history they cover the Holy Spirit was conspicuous by his absence.

When the Holy Spirit does make his appearances in the Old Testament he empowers only big figures like Kings (David), Prophets (Elijah) Belazel the builder of the Temple. So it was a pretty exclusive club of grandees and great men who got filled by the Holy Spirit.

But all of a sudden in the First Advent, The Holy Spirit took wings and began to transform the lives of ordinary humble people starting with John the Baptist. And then in no time the Holy Spirit was hopping and bopping all over the hill country of Judea –

- He came to Elisabeth, the elderly mother of John,
- then to the village girl Mary, to give her the astounding news that she was about to become pregnant as the Mother of Jesus.
- then to other local characters such as Anna and Simeon in the Temple.

27 November 2022

So to unlock the mystery story of Advent my tip is: Watch out for what the Holy Spirit is doing. In the first Advent he was transforming the lives of ordinary people just as he does today.

So a new era of Holy Spirit filled inspiration and transformation began in the first Advent.

John the Baptist, the son of Elisabeth and Zachariah was the first Spirit filled preacher.

In extraordinary numbers the people of Israel flocked to hear his message, which he proclaimed in the desert. What was his message? First and foremost it was a message of repentance: "Bear fruits worthy of repentance" he says in verse 8 of our reading.

Matthews Gospel quotes John urging the crowds: "Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is near". What does this mean? Repentance is a somewhat obscure word in the English language.

It conjures up images of saying sorry over and over again or writing out 100 lines or standing in the corner wearing the dunce's cap or in ancient times wearing sackcloth and ashes. Some of these concepts can still be valid. But in today's worlds these perceptions of repentance don't quite work.

To get the full richness of the repentance John the Baptist was demanding you have to go to the language in which the Gospels were originally written: New Testament Greek. And in the original Greek language the word for repentance is: 'METANOIA' which translates literally as 'META' = A CHANGE and 'NOIA' = OF MIND.

27 November 2022

Perhaps this more richly translates as a change of heart and mind. If you don't say sorry to God.

As John the Baptist made clear without such a change you can't get anywhere in a journey towards God or towards the Kingdom of Heaven. You can't even start the journey, if you don't repent – if you don't change your hearts and mind.

And John then hits home his message of repentance in language so fierce that if it were used today by a C of E clergyman he would probably face charges under a CDM (Clergy Discipline Measure): "You brood of Vipers" began John

He warned those who don't repent, who don't show the fruits of their repentance and those who don't change their hearts and minds, will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

Tough stuff, but we ignore it at our peril.

For being a peoples preacher John spelled out one or two practical rules of repentance when the crowds asked him "what shall we do?"

John's first answer was: People should share with one another. He was proclaiming a social Gospel message that God will never absolve anyone who is content to have too much while others have too little.

Secondly, John made it clear that people seeking God should not leave their jobs. Instead they should work out their own salvation by doing their jobs as they should be done. 'Let the tax collector be a good tax collector, let the soldier be a good soldier' said John. People following God have a duty to serve God where God has sent them.

27 November 2022

It was John's message that there is nowhere we can serve God better than our daily work. It is a good message for all of us today.

As a more modern John, Johnny Cash once memorably put it after singing one of his greatest hits "*I Walk the Line*" for a church full of Southern Baptists in Memphis Tennessee: "Don't be so heavenly minded that you are no earthly use".

Besides learning from John's message, we can learn a lot from his character and example as God's messenger. One enormously important characteristic of John is that he was not an egotist. When the crowds who came out to hear him preach in the desert wilderness around the banks of the river Jordan wanted to know if he was the Messiah he replied "No!"

*"One who is more powerful than I is coming.
I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals.
He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with Fire"*

And in St. John's Gospel, John the Baptist is quoted as telling the crowds about the one who is coming "*He must become greater. I must become less*" John 3: 30

That's another good message for all us contemporary Christians. We must all reduce our own petty little egos if we are to move into a closer relationship with God during Advent.

27 November 2022

I hope by now you can all begin to see and to feel the power of the opening scenes in the mystery story of Advent.

Something is going to happen, something enormously important. But we don't know what it is. Strange stirrings are taking place in the whole Country of Judea and in the desert wilderness around the river Jordan. There are movements of Angels and of the Holy Spirit. We've had one miraculous pregnancy of the elderly Elizabeth who gives birth to John the Baptist.

Who grows up to be John the astonishingly compelling preacher and messenger who tells the people of Israel:

"Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is near"

"One who is more powerful than I is coming.

He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with Fire"

What did this mean then? What does it mean to us now?

Advent for Christians is a season of spiritual hope, optimism and fulfilment. It is in conflict with the secular world's current mood of commercial and political pessimism. As a secular nation we are fearful of the cost of living crisis, the energy crisis and the coming paralysis by train strikes, tube strikes, perhaps even nurses strikes. We might even agree with the words of the poet Yeats: *"Things fall apart. The centre cannot hold. Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world"*.

Thankfully the invisible, spiritual world sees Advent differently.

Today we have only raised the curtain on the mystery story that will unfold with the potential to give us hope and to satisfy our spiritual hunger and our quest for inner peace with God.

27 November 2022

"Coming next" as they say on trailers for TV series are thrilling episodes starring the Angel Gabriel, the Virgin Mary, The Annunciation, The Incarnation and the beginning of the Transformation of the World. So keep your seatbelts fastened and come back next Sunday. **Amen**