

The Cathedral Church of the Redeemer
The Third Sunday of Advent, year 'C'
13 December, 2009
The Rev'd Leighton Lee

John was Jesus' first witness and the culmination of the prophetic line of the Old Testament. He is called the 'forerunner' of the Messiah; he himself acknowledged his role as the herald of one greater to come. But he would, I'm afraid, have failed the courses I took on preaching at General Seminary because he starts off with a harangue; he doesn't address his audience as "my friends" but as a brood of vipers. This is no way to win over your hearers. But then again, John, like all people with prophetic gifts, had very little time for niceties and euphemisms. With single-minded urgency and directness of purpose he called for social justice and plain dealing. He proclaimed that the lives of the comfortable and self-satisfied would be turned upside down with the coming of the Messiah. He called for repentance, which wasn't merely an insurance policy against the dreadful day but was a sign that the dreadful day was very near. Those whose deeds reflected their repentance and thereby changed their attitudes and actions would be spared, whereas those who turned outwardly but inwardly remained the same would not be spared.

It is a message that has by and large gone unheeded. The world remains pretty much as it was when John preached on the banks of the Jordan. The stern warnings remain a proclamation of things to come. And although there are many more Christians now, and the world is older, that dreadful day has not yet happened and appears no nearer now than it was then. The content of John's preaching is not confirmed by the experience of history. This is why Advent is a more painful season than Lent, for Advent speaks of a perennial hope, a great expectation that, despite the language of hymns that tell us that the day is drawing near and that light prevails over darkness, is not realized: things actually seem just like the "same old, same old."

What has happened, of course, is that Jesus, the one to whom John pointed, also came preaching a message of repentance, but the Church has ended up preaching Jesus and has insisted on making Jesus the object of its attention rather than heeding his message. Jesus, who came preaching, became the preached. It is correct but not sufficient to say that Jesus is the gospel or the good news. That is true, but it is not all there is to the matter. Those who heard Jesus preaching and teaching heard him give specific utterance to a point of view that he himself called the glad tidings. He came preaching not himself but something to which he himself pointed, and in our zeal most of us have failed to give deference to the content of his preaching.

And so we have become numb to the possibilities of the reordering of the world and are comfortable and complacent. Like those who keep the television on mute, even though we may be aware of the figure talking, we never heed – or even hear – the message. But the message is clear: even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; the time is late. Now, not tomorrow or next year or on our deathbed, but now is the time of repentance.

We are to point the world away from the priorities of this present age toward the priorities of the Kingdom of God, long-promised and often-sought, yes, but also here in the midst of us, waiting for us to take up John's awesome and even frightening mantle and proclaim Jesus to the world.

Which means, in practical terms, that we are to be Jesus' hands of healing and eyes of compassion and heart of love to the world which sees him and knows him not. That is to say, we are to work actively for the coming of the promised day of God and are, by our very lives, to anticipate its values here and now. It does no good to talk endlessly – and piously – about Jesus if we don't actually try to live as he lived. To do so, of course, takes no small amount of courage and a stout heart, for it means that, like John, we cannot be concerned with niceties when we encounter, as we do every day, a world of selfishness and oppression and people so consumed with their own agenda that they have become anesthetized to the needs of their fellow human beings.

Now is the time when we must cease to talk about Jesus and instead must wake up and heed his message. Now is the time when the whole earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. Now he is almost among us again. Are we ready to hear his gospel and to live it?