

THE REVD JONATHAN AITKEN SERMON

ADVENT 2

Sunday 5 December 2021



ST MATTHEW'S WESTMINSTER

Baruch 5.1-9

Philippians 1.3-11

Luke 3.1-6

Well, it's been a long time between sermons. I last preached here at Sunday Mass back in March – just over nine months ago.

So, to my great regret I've been more of an absent priest than an assistant priest in 2021, yet with a happy ending.

For as many of you know I had a close call when my colon became poisoned by septicaemia.

- But After 20 days in intensive care.
- Two heart attacks on the operating table
- Three major surgery operations
- And many weeks of arduous physiotherapy

I am now completely cured and overflowing with physical and spiritual energy.

Of course, I give the highest praise to the large cast of surgeons, anaesthetists, doctors, nurses and physios who looked after me so well - not least my home trained Stoma nurse, Jessie.

Not all in the cast of doctors expected me to survive certain critical moments. Yet you can see, as they say in the SAS, I did "beat the clock".

And I am absolutely sure that it was the power of prayer, much of it coming from St Matthew's, that made the difference and kept the clock ticking.

So, from the heart, thank you all for your prayers which have been so wonderfully well answered.

This brings me to St Paul's prayer for the Philippians, which we heard in our New Testament reading this morning.

What a great prayer from the great Apostle: "*I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you*" he begins.

Six verses later Paul is still going strong talking telling those fortunate Philippians: "*And this is my prayer that your love may overflow more and more ...having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.*"

Now, much as we may admire this Pauline trumpet blast of certainty, we should admit that there were times during the first Advent and times now in this 21st century Advent when the sound of the spiritual trumpets was not quite so full of certitude.

For Advent is the season of waiting, a time when you don't always appreciate fortissimo brass and percussion accompaniment to your prayers

In my favourite Advent book, which is also the favourite Advent book of Father Philip, "*The Coming of God*", its author Maria Boulding writes:

"Advent is the consecration of waiting in our lives.

Human life is full of waiting: people wait for trains, buses and planes; they stand in queues and shops; they sit nervously in dentists' waiting rooms; they wait in anguish for news of a lost loved one. They wait for the slow process of healing to take its time....."

Personally, I've learned quite a lot this year about "*waiting for the slow process of healing to take its time*".

And I would agree with Maria Boulding that such waiting times can be "*bleak winters of the Spirit*".

Yet, in the bleak mid-winter of the first Advent, there suddenly arrived the mysterious, baffling, yet compelling, figure of John the Baptist. Quoting an Old Testament prophet he was the harbinger of change as Luke tells us in today's Gospel: "*a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*".

If anyone feels a little underwhelmed by these words, as a message of change and new hope, it is perhaps partly because uncharacteristically the English language lets us down.

For the word "Repentance" translates rather inadequately in our mother tongue. It tends to suggest:

Issuing artificial public apologies.

Saying sorry over and over again.

Standing in the corner wearing the Dunce's cap.

Or, in the old days, putting on sackcloth and ashes.

None of these activities make Repentance seem particularly convincing, let alone attractive.

But if we go to the language in which Luke wrote his gospel – Greek – the word for repentance *METANOIA* is far more intriguing:

"Metanoia" translates literally as:

Meta = a change

Noia = of mind

Perhaps more imaginatively rendered as: "A change of heart and mind"

Now, perhaps we should be a little careful here. Changing hearts and minds can be something of a cliché.

I remember being a young War Correspondent in Vietnam in the 1960's when the Pentagon announced that MACV (Military Assistance Command Vietnam) was launching an H & M campaign (or Hearts and Minds) to convert the Viet Cong to the superior values of the American way of life. Well, that didn't work out too well.

And in the spiritual world Jesus warns his hearers in the parable of the Sower that the seed that springs up on stony ground often doesn't take root, however, enthusiastically it is initially received.

By contrast, the slow nurturing of good seed on good ground is an incremental, rather than an instantaneous, process. That is true in the life of individual souls and in the life of the Church.

In the life of our church here at SMW, we have had a difficult year, yet paradoxically an encouraging year.

Our finances and our Sunday congregation numbers are challenging, but our faithful have stayed faithful. What I call "the unpretentious excellence" of our Liturgy, our Services and our music have remained excellent. And there are green shoots of hopeful growth emerging.

We have just come to the end of our first term of new Choral Evensongs, held every Wednesday evening since the beginning of September.

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It has been an experiment and a successful one, requiring huge amounts of dedicated hard work, musically, administratively and spiritually.

But if I can give you a rather partisan snapshot of last Wednesday's Evensong, I would say that it showed the new Saint Matthew's Westminster at its best and most innovative.

We had over 60 people filling the church for the Service, drawn from all walks of life and from all generations.

The generations ranged from the 94 year old Mother of the Archbishop of Canterbury to Prison Officers in their twenties, to many young graduates and musicians starting out in their careers.

It was a really attractive mixture of people, few of whom are regular church goers, yet with a chemistry that suggested that they are capable of going on being attracted to an interesting church.

At best, most of Wednesday evening's congregation were probably what are called half Christians. Perhaps they may one day discover, as I did, that being a half Christian is about as useful as being half pregnant!

For commitment, like peace, comes dropping slow. What matters is that we, as a church, should be pointing the way both on ancient paths and on new routes towards God's Grace.

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These ancient paths and new routes are already embedded in our long-established ministry at SMW. A ministry of prayer, dialogue and hospitality.

On the hospitality point, I can report that we had a really good party here after the Evensong with delicious food by Jessie. I also noticed that the 60 or perhaps 70 guests consumed 42 bottles of wine. Perhaps I miscounted. Shurely shome mishtake! But if I counted right, the miracle of Canaan at Galilee will be needed if we have many more parties like this!

Let's end by getting back to John the Baptist. He is the hero of today's Gospel reading. He was God's messenger. Preparing the way of The Lord.

In Advent 2021, most of us will not be exalting valleys, flattening mountains and making rough places plain.

But we can do our bit as we wait for the coming of The Lord.

Helping and praying for St Matthew's to strengthen and grow in interesting ways are good suggestions for us to do our bit this Advent. **Amen**