

SERMON FOR ADVENT 3 | 17.12.2017

There was an interesting radio programme the other day discussing the difference between reading a newspaper and tweeting. How, said the journalist, is it possible to have a balanced and well informed discussion about anything important in 140 characters?

Of course it was a bit of a whack at President Trump for whom this way of communicating is a way of life and it was also a bit of a memorial service for the newspaper industry which is in such sharp decline.

But it might sharpen our thinking about the way people like John the Baptist, the prophets in general – and of course Jesus himself – spoke in public. Nearly all of their set pieces were short, full of picture references – and highly dramatic. Like the key political Twitter messages that come out of the White House, for better or worse they manage to capture people’s attention. Even Michael McIntyre’s Saturday night show has a text message game as part of the mix.

What does John the Baptist shout from the fringe districts beyond Jerusalem: *Make straight the Way of the Lord. Among you stands one whom you do not know. I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.* He also said a few unsavoury things about what laid in people’s hearts and their need to repent, but not a great deal more.

So why does he get quite so much coverage in the early chapters of St Luke – all those stories about his mother being too old to have a baby, about his dad the priest being struck dumb until the time he writes down the child’s name. Why do we get those enigmatic stories about John’s disciples listening to Jesus, unsure which of them was greater; why too the detailed story later about Herod having John beheaded because of his drunken promise to a dancing girl?

Surely the reason is because, without saying very much, John the Baptist stood for something. He stood in the long line of prophets – those called to turn people back to God. And that call often had a political angle.

Which might well lead us to ask: if a prophet like John the Baptist was able to make such an impact in his own day – to the point that someone wanted him killed because of the influence he had, do we have anyone equivalent today? Are there still prophets in our own generation, people who attract the attention – if not the support – of those around them?

Yes, there are people of immense influence in our lives. There are people who enable us to see things in a new light – from medical science to international politics to global warming. The radio broadcast I mentioned and any number of documentaries on TV do just that. Well researched, well illustrated and well presented – we have never been so well informed, and with relatively little effort on our part. We can surf the internet and all forms of digital media and it is all there, waiting for us.

And yet, for all the ease of communication, does any of it really makes much difference? Are our hearts turned by the plethora of appeals to us to be more responsible for our planet or more charitable to those less fortunate? And the answer is yes – a bit. People do give huge amounts for all kinds of worthy causes – running marathons and all sorts.

But not, by and large, for the reasons that motivated John the Baptist. His criticism of the way people lived was wholly justified – just like many of the things we do today. But his pitch was: and God is not happy with this behaviour and what you are doing imperils your immortal soul.

Can we seriously imagine anyone having the temerity to say that today? We can preach change for a better world, for self-preservation even - but to talk about apocalyptic consequences, almost no one has any time for that today.

Listen to any religious leader today, any Christian commentator (and there are precious few of those today who most people would have heard of) and they will talk about the care of our fellow citizens as being a matter of human rights, the better thing to do for our general well-being. They will not wade in with *unless we change we will be punished by God who will finally hold all things to account.*

When Pope Francis – who has perhaps the greatest claim to be able to speak on behalf of the Christian community – went to Myanmar and to Aung San Suu Ky to talk about the plight of the Rohingya Muslims – he was deeply criticized for not even mentioning them in Burma itself.

But the world watched and reacted hugely positively when he stood with the Muslims in Bangladesh, and held their hands with tears in his eyes.

On this Sunday in Advent we light our third candle – and it is pink. Not to remember Mary the Mother of Jesus as some suppose but to express Hope.

Our hope comes the belief not that we can make the changes that we would like to see in our world. We know our own weakness and we know that the power to make changes will rest in people who profess no faith – or who pay lip service to religious principles. Unlike the Russian Orthodox mother I was talking to this week, I don't believe that all those in power have God's blessing and authority – Mugabe's recent removal is a sign of how fragile such power really is.

But I do hold to the impact of people like John the Baptist – and you and me for that matter – who continue to hope that people will hear an alternative narrative, even from the fringes of society, out in the wilderness and from our parish churches..

And the power of love and concern for others is part of God's economy, part of his will. And like the Pope in Bangladesh and the work of Pack-Up here, we go on showing in what we do our conviction that ultimately the values that Jesus came to show us -spoken of by John the Baptist, will be the ones that prevail.

But as so often the words of Francis of Assisi come to mind: *Preach the Gospel and at all time – and when necessary, use words.*