**SERMON FOR ADVENT 3 | 13.12.20**

Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-1; 1 Thessalonians 5: 16-24; St John 1: 6-8, 19-28

**However much we are throwing ourselves into preparing for this Christmas, we can’t help but think how much easier things were last year before Covid, lockdowns and social distancing came to dominate our lives.**

**Among the series of groups who came through the doors last December year was North London Cares who do such impressive work in our community among the elderly and disadvantaged. So it was that, on one freezing Wednesday night, Liz Buckle and her team gathered a big audience in St James’ to watch the Muppet Christmas Carol using our newly installed data projector - raising about £3,000 that night in the process.**

**It’s a great film with memorable lyrics as well as music, and is remarkably faithful to Dicken’s original tale of how Ebenezer Scrooge is taken in a series of visions from being a total Christmas skin-flint to becoming godfather to Tiny Tim and the generous benefactor to all of Bob Cratchit’s family. As the blurb sa*ys: The story of Ebenezer Scrooge’s repentance is still as strong today as it was when Charles Dickens first penned it. In the song “Thankful Heart,” Scrooge vows to express his change of heart by helping anyone that he can. He promises to end their suffering (especially that caused by him) and above all else, he is thankful that he has the opportunity to do so.***

**As is the way of such things, the numbers of people who will have watched the Muppet Christmas Carol will have totally dwarfed the audience that gathered by the Jordan to listen (live) to John the Baptist – or even the millions of people who have listened to sermons preached about the message of John the Baptist! But the underlying theme is the same. As Dr Mark Carney, formerly Governor of the Bank of England, has been lamenting in this year’s Reith lectures on Radio 4, society continues to relentlessly place financial values over human, ethical values. With wonderful clarity Carney spells out the way a trio of crises: of credit, Covid and climate, have contributed to our fixation on trying to make the world a better place based simply on financial values. As he says, western society in particular has come to embody Oscar Wilde’s aphorism: *Knowing the price of everything but the value of nothing.***

**John the Baptist would have understood all this, out there in the desert by the River Jordan, and would have been equally caustic about the commercial mindset which reduces the way we live together to the way market forces exclude the basic Christian truth: that all we have is a gift from God. Not only does he give us all we have - freely and generously – his underlying predisposition and plan for the world is to show us that the more we give away, the more we learn to stop seeking to track investment and returns, the greater the final harvest will become.**

**Two years ago, in 2018, our former Bishop Adrian Newman was asked to look at the way our Cathedrals operate. Now Cathedrals are one of the great Church success stories. In a national tour of the 43 Anglican Cathedrals he reported that their mission has burgeoned over the last fifteen years with attendances of well over 10million a year - at least in part a reflection of the social projects in which they are involved: meals for the homeless, schemes to help young people to engage with their local history, interfaith initiatives to bring communities together to celebrate the things they have in common – from sport and art to food.**

**At Durham Cathedral, the Bishop highlighted the Anglican Church’s commitment to helping refugees; in Carlisle, the Cathedral was excited to welcome their first Syrian refugee families in partnership with the local authority and local community groups. In Hereford, the cathedral provided English language lessons; in Norwich a new interfaith choir had been formed and friendships had blossomed in Chelmsford between the Cathedral and the local Mosque - through cricket. Creating active programmes of events and training of staff and volunteers in welcoming people had brought more people through the doors and had, coincidentally, also increased their income.**

**And all of this can be caught in those words of John the Baptist: *make straight the way of the Lord.* These are the extraordinary, pluriform and generous ways that God works among his people. Isaiah describes it so well for us: *The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has appointed me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour – to give them garlands instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning.***

**Now we know, of course this outward-going ministry of hospitality and generosity isn’t confined to our Cathedrals; it has to be part of the DNA of every Church community too. Here at St James’, I read with such delight the email from Gordon McArthur of the Arlington Association and his pleasure at the money they had been able to raise for Pack-Up via the virtual Christmas Fair yesterday. Later on I stood outside the doors of the Church amid the buzz of excitement as young musicians from a local music school talked about the concert they had just finished and of the pride of one of the young cellists who had performed the same piece that Sheku Kanneh-Mason had played at Harry and Meghan’s wedding. He is just ten years old. Isaiah again: *as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations…***

**But, says John the Baptist, it all depends on the attitude of the heart. It is about trust and faith in the God who works miracles and moves mountains; but it is also about repentance, the kind of repentance that Scrooge came to understand which relies – not on our grasping control of what we think is ours – but on the free disposition to use our resources in ways that will allow God to do his work of growing new shoots where we least expect - and in quantities we can only wonder at. Jesus’ parable of the sower is not about a 5% carefully calculated return but 30%, 60% and 100%!**

**When the Pharisees come to investigate John’s ministry with questions from their metaphorical clipboard about whether he is the Messiah, or Elijah, or some other prophet – he dismisses their narrowmindedness as being too conventional, too limited and too controlling. *Look first,* he says, *at the most unlikely place for growth: a barren wilderness. Next, look beyond my warm-up campaign for the changing of hearts and look out for the One who is to follow me, the one whose sandals I am not worthy to undo. Look out for Jesus…***

**Isaiah, Scrooge, Mark Carney, John the Baptist: it’s one and the same message. Only when we take the step of faith and respond to the needs around us with faith and hope can the wilderness of our hearts - and the wilderness of our broken world - taste the new freedoms that God has prepared for those who love him. Try to control what you have and you will end up with dust and ashes. *Give it away,* says John (reflecting Isaiah) and *the ruined cities shall be repaired and, in Christ, the glory of the Lord shall be revealed.***