**Advent 3 12 December 2021**

## (Zephaniah 3:14-20; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18)

Well, whilst it is tempting this week to bring politics into my sermon I think it best to steer clear of that particular banana-skin… But I might just mention such things as truthfulness and integrity; and good judgment.

Judgment, of course, is very much an Advent theme, and having earlier lit our third Advent Candle we see that we are more than half-way through this season of preparation. The third candle in many wreaths, including our own, is the pink – or rather, ‘rose’-coloured – one. That colour represents ‘joy’ – as the emphasis in Advent will shift this week from preparing for Christ’s second coming in judgment to preparing to celebrate – with great rejoicing – his first coming, as one of us.

Traditionally, we think on this day of the role played by John the Baptist, in ‘preparing the way of the Lord’. John was the *forerunner* of Jesus; the one who pointed away from himself and proclaimed the presence of the Messiah. Through his message in today’s gospel reading, which is very much one of impending judgment, John is urging us to strive always to say and do the right thing; to take account of the needs of others and not simply our own; to be a ‘tree that bears good fruit’.

At Morning Prayer each day a canticle known as the Benedictus, the Song of Zechariah, is said. It comes from Luke’s gospel, a little before today’s passage. Zechariah, a faithful priest, was John’s father and as you will recall, he had been struck dumb when told that he and his wife Elizabeth would have a son in their old age: he ‘did not believe it’! It was only when John was born that Zechariah was able to speak again, and in his joy he praised God. His song tells of the coming of a ‘mighty Saviour’, and of John being ‘the prophet of the Most High’. Zechariah says, “for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way, to give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of all their sins”. No wonder Jesus said of John, ‘I tell you, among those**born of women** **none is** greater than**John’!**

For me, the Benedictus contains a deeply significant verse, one which I would say distils the essence of the Christian faith, and it resonates each day as I say it at Morning Prayer. Zechariah affirms the promise God had made to Abraham, one of the patriarchs we recalled at the lighting of our first Advent candle. This promise was that God would set his people free, “free to worship him without fear, holy and *righteous in his sight* all the days of our life”.

I know I have mentioned this before, and I will do so again (and again!), but if we are ‘righteous of God’s sight’ then that is exactly how God sees us. If we have faith in him, and endeavour to grow in our ‘knowledge of [the] salvation’ won for us by the coming of Christ, then we need have no fear of judgment. As St Paul taught, and as Martin Luther and the whole Reformation movement of the Church reminded us, Christ’s coming won for us the possibility of ‘righteousness by faith’.

Liberated, then, from the hopeless task of being judged worthy through our works we are free to strive to grow into that state which God already sees in us. But strive we must, hence the need always to check: are our words and deeds taking into account the needs of others and not simply our own? Are we practising good judgment? Are we trees that bear good fruit?

Our Archbishop, Stephen Cottrell, speaks of judgment as not being about weighed in the scales and found wanting (for that, he says, is a contest no one can win, and the very reason Christ came in the first place), but it is about being judged *ready for glory*. So I ask again, are we practising good judgment, in our words and our deeds?

In the life of the Church, the few days before today have been so-called ‘Ember Days’, when we pray for all who serve in the mission and ministry of the Church – whether in lay or ordained roles, whether in word or deed. The Collect for the ministry of all Christian people asks that ‘each of us in our vocation and ministry may serve God in holiness and truth’.

Now, as you know, here at St Mary’s we have no church hall. This limits what we can do in serving the wider community. Unless or until that changes the only solution is for us to go out and meet people where they are, and it is heartening that this is exactly what happens. So many members of this church family participate in the life of the town, serving in holiness and truth – pointing, like John the Baptist, beyond themselves to the presence of God.

So I am a strong advocate of what used to be known as ‘ministry in secular employment’ [paid or unpaid]: Christians leavening the lump of the world by being present in the world. For example, we know and are thankful that there are many Christians who understand their vocation and ministry to be working in industries such as nuclear power or in genetic research, or in the field of politics.

In mentioning politics again, and still being careful to avoid banana-skins, I recall from the days of New Labour, the then press secretary Alistair Campbell stating ‘We don’t do God’. This was in spite of the general understanding that the Prime Minister Tony Blair was a committed Christian.

Imagine my surprise then, to see Alastair Campbell in the recent second BBC series of ‘Winter Walks’ – in which three of the programmes were based in the Yorkshire Dales. Besides meeting the Shepherdess Amanda Owen in Wensleydale, not Swaledale, we met Alistair Campbell on a walk near to Settle. He spoke very openly about his own journey through life, including his inner life, and he spoke movingly about the countryside. Observing the majesty of trees, he quoted Herman Hesse, who considered trees not just to be things of beauty but ‘preachers’, Hessee had said: “For me, trees have always been the most penetrating preachers”.

Surely, trees like John the Baptist *point beyond themselves*, whether upwards as with a church spire, or outwards to the world around. And as John warned, unless tress bear good fruit they can be cut down. Trees also remind us of the ‘branch’ referred to in Isaiah’s prophecy of which we will hear more in the days to come, a prophecy speaking of truthfulness and integrity; knowledge of salvation; righteousness and judgment; the coming of God’s kingdom in the world, and ultimately of glory:

    There shall come forth a shoot from the stock of Jesse,

and a *branch* shall grow out of his roots.

    And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him,

the spirit of wisdom and understanding,

    The spirit of counsel and might,

the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

    He shall not judge by what his eyes see,

or decide by what his ears hear,

    But with righteousness he shall judge the poor,

and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.

    The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,

and the leopard shall lie down with the kid.

    The calf, the lion and the fatling together,

with a little child to lead them.

    They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain,

for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord

as the waters cover the sea.

Thanks be to God. Amen.