

May these words be pleasing. Amen.

At the start of this month there was in our calendar a day commemorating Charles de Foucauld, who died in 1916, also known as the Hermit of the Sahara. Now that's a pretty tough gig isn't it? Not 'the holy man of Harrogate' or 'the soul healer of Surbiton', no, this is 'The Hermit of the Sahara'. Here are sections of his citation: Born in 1858 he led a dissipated life as a young officer in the cavalry. Serving in Morocco he developed a passion for North Africa, returning (also) to his Catholic faith, went on pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and became a Trappist monk. As if that wasn't severe enough he was then ordained and became a hermit in Algeria, becoming loved for his care and concern for local tribes-people. He composed rules for potential brothers and sisters based on his desire for an increasingly austere way of living (as a hermit in the Sahara). The citation ends: None ever actually joined him.

Today we light candle three on our Advent wreath. Today's candle commemorates John the Baptist. He too worked in desert lands but unlike Charles John *did* have followers, attracted by his simple message of 'repent', 'get ready' and 'be made clean', be cleansed in the waters of the river Jordan, be washed by John the Baptiser.

Last week Martin preached about *all* the prophets, our second candle commemorates the voice of all the prophets, whose work it is to shine a light on a divine purpose, a direction, a pattern, a destination. Alternatively, we and our world can grope around in darkness leaving things to chance, finding patterns when in fact there are none. Martin mentioned the lottery, a game of chance played in many countries. Yesterday in our National Lottery the winning numbers were 13,38,39,49,53, and 56. Two weeks ago in South Africa the 6 lottery balls were: 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10. Although our instinct tells us otherwise these are as likely as our own random numbers last night. The prophets, our prophets point to a divine purpose. They point us towards the divine purpose of our living God and away from the random, meaningless chaos

of darkness. John the Baptists points literally to the divine living God, and away from a dry wilderness living without God.

Who was John? His mother Elizabeth was a relative of Mary and therefore John was a relative of Jesus. It is likely that Jesus was a carpenter as his father Joseph was a carpenter. We do not know what John did as he grew up: we are not told what *his* father Zechariah did, probably not a speech therapist.

Who did John think he was as he gathered a following in and around the waters of the Jordan? Did he understand his message in the way that we understand his message through our four gospels, the good news story of the life, death, and re-birth of Jesus? He knows, as he points to Jesus, that he shows the way to someone far greater, far more important than himself. The Light of Christ is far, far greater than that small light of John. But does he fully understand what Jesus is, what Jesus means? How can he? How can we fully understand what John points to this Advent: the divine made flesh trusting *us* with his presence, his message, his light.

I wonder if we can pause and think on this idea of 'trust'. It was the key idea in this the third week of the deanery Advent course running on Thursdays. God trusts us. God trusts us to share in the Advent lights of the patriarchs, the prophets, John, Mary and even the Christmas light of Jesus. God trusts you not to bury his light in the ground where it remains unseen, but to invest His light in our lives and in our world so that it generates interest.

In Thursday's notes was a Dutch proverb: 'Trust arrives on foot, but leaves on horseback.' I was grateful to have this explained to me: It takes a lot of time and patience to establish and build up trust, but it can be lost very quickly through a careless act or word or damaging action. 'Trust arrives on foot, but leaves on horseback.' It would be painful to recount those times I have abused the trust of others or to acknowledge that our church has lost the trust of many. Painful and obvious.

Easier, instead to share with you how I have more than stretched the trust of some of our first years at school this week. I visited a tutor group and watched the tutor go through the notices and presentations for the morning. Throughout all this a small girl had her hand up, unseen by her tutor. Eventually the notices finished and the tutor noticed the hand of the young girl. Yes? Please miss, can I ask sir a question? Of course. Sir, she asked, are you the famous actor from the film Home Alone 2? Now for the benefit of those who have not seen this cultural classic I give the hotel manager a.k.a. Tim Curry. 'Sir, are you the famous actor from the film Home Alone 2?' 'Why yes, I am, thank you, thank for remembering that film, we had great fun making it.' All the first years in that class believed and were amazed. As was the tutor. I apologised to her the next day, and, I hope, trust is restored.

Let's return to John (the Baptist), trusted to proclaim the coming of Jesus. We may wonder who he thought he was, we may wonder who he thought Jesus was. We may, in turn, wonder when *Jesus* fully realised that he was different, but not just different he was a prophet, but just a prophet but he was the Son of God, the Messiah, the Christ.

And, finally, who do we think we are, who would we like to be? I'm not sure I can recommend following the Hermit of the Sahara whereas aspiring to be something like the Righteous of Richmond sounds, perhaps, far too pompous. We may, in fact, have a very low opinion of ourselves and what we are and what we are to be. But, says Paul, 'rejoice'. Rejoice in the will of God and hold on to that which is good. God trusts you to hold on to that which is good and to share that which is good. God trusts you to share in the Advent lights of the patriarchs, the prophets, John, Mary and even the Christmas light of Jesus. God trusts you not to bury his light in the ground where it remains unseen, but to invest His light in our lives and in our world so that it generates interest. God trusts you.

A reading from the first letter to the Thessalonians (5:16-24, NRSV).

¹⁶Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray without ceasing, ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. ¹⁹Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰Do not despise the words of prophets, ²¹but test everything; hold on to that which is good; ²²abstain from every form of evil.

²³ May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

This is the word of the Lord.

All Thanks be to God.

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to John All **Glory to you, O Lord.**

⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

¹⁹ This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' ²⁰He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, 'I am not the Messiah.'²¹And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' 'Are you the prophet?' He answered, 'No.'

²²Then they said to him, 'Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?' ²³He said,

'I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,
"Make straight the way of the Lord" ', as the prophet Isaiah said.

²⁴ Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. ²⁵They asked him, 'Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?' ²⁶John answered them, 'I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, ²⁷the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.' ²⁸This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

All **Praise to you, O Christ**

A reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah (61:1–4, 8-11 NRSV).

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;

² to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;

³ to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.

⁴ They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.

⁸ For I the Lord love justice,
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;

I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.
⁹ Their descendants shall be known among the nations,
and their offspring among the peoples;
all who see them shall acknowledge
that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.
¹⁰ I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,
my whole being shall exult in my God;

for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
¹¹ For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.

This is the word of the Lord.

All Thanks be to God.