Advent 3 – John the Baptist by Rosemary Sumner at All Saints

Recently, I was discussing favourite crime novels with a friend, and I mentioned that I was saving up the latest Elly Griffiths’ Ruth Galloway novel so I had something to look forward to. “How sad,” she said, “if that is all you have to look forward to.”

When life seems bleak, it is natural for people to look forward to a better time ahead. The Jews have throughout their history looked forward hopefully to a happier future. At the time of Jesus, this was particularly so. Living in a country occupied by a foreign power, the Romans, it was not surprising that they longed for the prophecies about a coming Messiah to be fulfilled. Some Jews, the Zealots, became terrorists, killing Romans when they had the chance. Others, like the Essenes, believed that God would show his hand if they purified themselves, so they withdrew to the Judaean desert to form special communities to prepare themselves spiritually for the coming of the Teacher of Righteousness. Today we can read some of their writings and the scriptures which they studied. The most famous group became known as the Qumran Community.

Then a strange figure emerged from the desert, strangely dressed, warning of judgement and offering people the chance to turn back to God, renounce their sinful ways, live a better life and receive divine forgiveness through baptism in the River Jordan. We know of him today as John the Baptiser. Luke alone has an account of his family background. John came from a priestly family: his father was a priest called Zechariah and his mother was Elizabeth, a relative of Mary who became the mother of Jesus, thus making the 2 boys cousins. His conception and birth are described by Luke in true OT style, as a God-ordained event – an unexpected conception after years of barrenness, and given a name by God to his father, who is struck dumb until the actual birth. Then we hear nothing until his startling appearance years later, warning this “brood of vipers” of the “wrath to come” if they do not repent.

John urged the people to share with those less fortunate than themselves;the taxcollectors to be honest; soldiers to be content with their wages and not rob other people by violence or false accusations. He warned that time is short; already the axe is at the root of the trees.

He makes an immediate impact: people rush to baptism and a washing away of their sins so that they are ready for the coming of a person greater than John, who will baptise them with the Holy Spirit. This second person’s role is scary, for he comes like a farmer at harvest who collects in the real crop but destroys the weeds and chaff.

Mark actually opens his gospel by declaring that this John fulfils the prophecy of Isaiah 40: 3-5, which centuries before referred to the Jewish exiles returning home from exile in Babylon:

“Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way; the voice of one crying in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.””

Matthew and Luke follow Mark. Suddenly Jesus himself appears requesting baptism. Matthew says that John recognised Jesus as the prophesied one and was reluctant to baptise him but was persuaded to do so by Jesus himself. All 4 gospel writers report that the Holy Spirit was seen in the form of a dove and the 3 Synoptic writers record a voice declaring that this man, Jesus, is his Son, the Beloved One, with whom he is well pleased. After a retreat to the desert, Jesus began his ministry in Galilee.

John’s gospel records John the Baptist in conversation with the Pharisees, who ask if he is Elijah whose return is promised in Mal.4:5-6 , or the Prophet like unto Moses of Dt. 18:15. Here, John the Baptist himself actually claims to be the Voice of Isa. 40. John 1:35-42 also says that Andrew was originally a disciple of the Baptist and joined Jesus after the Baptist declared him to be “the Lamb of God”.

Some time after this, John was imprisoned by King Herod Antipas, who apparently was really interested in him, despite John’s condemnation of Herod’s adultery with his brother Philip’s wife. Their religious discussions came to an end when Herod foolishly agreed to a present for Salome, which turned out to be the head of John on a platter. We learn that Herod was dismayed, but felt he could not break his promise.

John’s group of disciples seem to have continued as a parallel group to those of Jesus. They went to Herod and retrieved his body for burial. It would seem that these 2 groups continued for many years because in Acts 19 we hear of some of them being in Ephesus where Paul tells them about the baptism which Jesus offered, and for the first time they receive baptism in the Spirit. Strangely, Apollos, whom Paul first met in Ephesus, knew of the death and resurrection of Jesus, but did not know about the giving of the Holy Spirit in baptism.

The question of the identity of Jesus was a crucial one, and it appears that John the Baptist, some time after the baptism, wanted reassurance that he had pointed people to the right man. This is recorded by Matthew and Luke, so may have been in the Q source, which was unknown to Mark. Jesus tries to set John’s mind at rest by performing a number of miracles of healing of the blind, lame, deaf and those with leprosy. He also says that the dead have been raised up and the poor have received good news. He tells them to return to John and describe what they have seen. John’s disciples depart and Jesus turns to the crowd and asks them what they thought about John. Jesus then declares that John was greater than a mere prophet; in fact he was the messenger of Isa. 40. He was the greatest man ever born; yet, ironically, he has the place of least importance in the Kingdom. Thus we see John as the bridge between the 2 covenants: the last in the line of the OT prophets. Sadly, Jesus concluded that the people were never satisfied: neither John’s Spartan way of life or his own practice of sharing meals with sinners would please them.

It is perhaps typical of human beings that they long for something to happen; but when it does, they are still not satisfied.

This Sunday is the third in Advent, a time in the church calendar, when we look forward, perhaps with hope, often with anxiety, to the coming of Christmas. These Sundays are designed as a way of reminding ourselves of what happened in the past and help us look forward, ultimately to the so-called “Second Coming”, the time when Jesus will return in glory and power and claim his own. The early church thought that the Second Coming would be soon, almost certainly in their own life times. Read Paul’s letters to the Thessalonians about 58 AD to see the intense sense of expectation among those early Christians. They were disappointed. The clouds did not open and the trumpets did not sound to proclaim their Lord’s return. Gradually, the emphasis on the Second Coming or Parousia faded. Today, many people think that it took place with the \us, just as he promised in John’s gospel.

So, what are you looking forward to? Many people this Advent will be looking forward with anxiety: money problems, ill health, heating the home, finding work, even the fear of war. Those of us who are Christians know that whatever befalls us, we are ultimately safe in the loving arms of God, our shield, protector and healer. We have the comfort of FAITH ; we experience the LOVE of God and of our fellow Christians. As Christmas approaches, can we reach out in some way to bring HOPE to those for whom there seems little to look forward to?

It could be a gift of money, words of reassurance, an offer of companionship, a shared meal, a friendly visit, even a Christmas card to show they are not forgotten.

Lord, open our minds afresh this Advent to the miracle of your love for us and help us to share that love with those who are in need of it. Amen