

Evensong readings:-

by

1 Kings ch.22, vv1-28.

Didymus

Romans ch.15, vv4-13

Gospel Matthew ch.11, vv2-11



Advent is the time when we recall the role of the prophets in Hebrew/Jewish history. We are told that the leaders of the Israelites were in communication with God, but it was Elijah and Elisha who began to separate prophecy from the leadership. Isaiah, arguably, was the major prophet of the Exile, but the work of some so-called minor prophets was significant. The last prophet was the latest, John the Baptist, whose task was not only to preach the word of God, but to act on it, as the herald of Christ.

John, for such an important person in the Nativity story, is interesting. It is important in examining scripture to remember that these were real people, like us, allowing of course for 2,000 years difference in time. They were not a myth. Most of our knowledge of John comes from the first chapter of Luke's Gospel. This Gospel, written half a century after John's death, was based on his conversations and notes. Chapter one is familiar, but still well worth reading at this time.

John was a devout man, a strong orator, and quite possibly he belonged to, or followed the Essene sect. The Essenes believed that temptation and evil came from mankind, and therefore it made sense to withdraw from normal life to monastic communities such as the one at Qumran on the Dead Sea. John had disciples of his own, and I believe the Dead Sea scrolls mention him. John was somewhat singular in his life style and powerful in his commitment, but all of John's being seems to follow God's plan. This is hardly surprising since the Nativity itself was God's plan.

St. John's first chapter, written some 20 years later reads quite clearly (KJV)

“²⁹ The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. ³⁰ This is he of whom I said, After me cometh a man which is preferred before me: for he was before me.”

John (JTB) baptised Jesus in the Jordan, and told Andrew and another, thought to be Philip, to follow Jesus. John's Gospel is clear and certain.



Matthew's Gospel reading reads oddly. By now JTB is in prison, having condemned Herod and Herodias. He has heard of the work of Jesus, and sends his disciples to question Jesus about his mission. There seems to be some doubt in the mind of JTB which hardly squares with his earlier certainty. He seems to be thinking - have I got it right? As if he could do anything about it. A minor point maybe, but the several translations that I have looked at all express unease. Jesus' reply must have been a great reassurance. Jesus continued with great praise for his relative – their mothers were kinswomen.

The reading from Kings has little to do with Advent, so far as I can see, and more to do with the general state of warfare which was (and is) a Middle Eastern pastime, probably because soccer and rugby had not yet been invented. It is an odd reading and not easy to tease out, but it does reflect uncertainty in a similar way to Matthew's reading. The King of Israel is Ahab, the corrupt king who became a Baal worshipper and was married to Jezebel. Elijah prophesied his grisly end.

In about 850BC Ahab and Jehoshaphat (of Judea) joined forces to retake the city of Ramoth Gilead, but called on Ahab's prophets (soothsayers) for confirmatory advice. Jehoshaphat wanted a prophet of God, a man named Micaiah, to speak of God's will. Ahab did not like Micaiah as he opposed his actions and

ideas. This was not the prophet Micah, who lived a century later, but the name was from the same root. The prophets of Ahab urged action as they claimed that it would succeed. Micaiah's advice to Ahab appeared to be the same, although he spoke of God's vision of Israel, leaderless, and the need to entice Ahab to his death.

So we canter through Advent. I was listening to Verdi's magic chorus of the Hebrew Slaves the other morning, and reflected on the parallel between the Exile and the Virus, and the virtual imprisonment that much of the world is suffering as a result, and in particular our younger loved ones to the north and east of Cornwall. Cornwall is a sort of "Open Prison", but remember others more inconvenienced elsewhere, especially those who live alone. Also remember to thank God for all in the medical professions and their work, but also for those kind people who are working to help those who are lonely, poor, aged, or ill in the community. There are so many that carry God's love into their lives.

John answered them, saying, I baptize with water: but there standeth one among you, whom ye know not; He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose.

Keep preparing.

AMEN

