

Sunday 7th December 2025, Advent 2. Benefice BCP Holy Communion, Stonegrave.

I began my Advent sermons last week by speaking about the words we say in our Holy Communion service, ‘Great is the mystery of faith’. This theme continued with our Advent course thinking about the mystery that is spiritual intelligence and discernment.

Every year, on the Second Sunday in Advent, our gospel reading features the prophets especially, today John the Baptist, whose sole task in life was to prepare the way for Jesus coming. John knew a very simple but world-changing truth – that the Messiah was coming; and it was time to get ready. John *believed* what the world only *hoped* for – that the Saviour was about to come, and with him would come the Kingdom of Heaven. John dedicated his life to preparing the way; even before he was born, when his mother felt him kick inside her when the pregnant Mary visited her. Later John would fearlessly and passionately, follow his calling, without counting the cost, which would be his very life. But he didn’t care, because he was doing what God had called him to do, and nothing else mattered. John the Baptist is sometimes called the “forerunner” because in the Gospel Isaiah spoke of him as ‘a voice crying out in the wilderness, preparing the way of the Lord.’. He came before Jesus, was sent in advance of Jesus, to announce his coming and prepare the world.

Today then maybe we should consider, who is our forerunner? Who (or what) prepares you for Jesus to come into your life? In his time, the purpose of John the Baptist, as were all the prophets going back 1000 years, were to be forerunners, to call those around them to

repentance, to prepare the way, but in our busy secular world, who or what does that for you? Your forerunner may not be a person at all. Perhaps it might be a new challenge, a new situation to cope with, a job, an Advent course, a relationship beginning or ending, even an illness, or losing a loved one in death. The Holy Spirit constantly calls people in all sorts of mysterious and varied ways to be “forerunners” preparing us for the coming of Jesus. Even suffering, can serve that role because it is not that God causes suffering, but sometimes causes suffering to lead us back to him as C.S. Lewis says, “*God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.*” Suffering can break our hearts open to the mystery and mercy of God, but suffering can also make us bitter. It can harden our hearts and close us to love and mercy. So, why does suffering lead some closer to Jesus, and why does it make others bitter? Why does it strengthen the faith of some and weaken the faith of others?

To consider that question in light of today’s gospel reading, we might wonder why some accepted John the Baptist, while others rejected him. Many people were going out to him, the story tells us, and were baptized by him, confessing their sins, but others were going out to him for other reasons. They considered themselves God’s chosen, the ones who had always been there, who had always done things their way and they didn’t need what John was offering. They didn’t need to repent because it meant a change in attitude and their whole way of life. John calls them out and calls them a brood of vipers and challenges them to bear fruit worthy of repentance.

Do we miss too the meaning of this story if we don't see a little of us in those vipers? If we don't acknowledge a little of that same sin of pride and arrogance and an unwillingness to change, because we always have led our lives in the same way controlled by pride and arrogance. Or it may be in our churches that we are preoccupied with maintenance rather than looking outwards expansively in mission and to be forerunners ourselves for others who are seeking Jesus.

Because we are baptized Christians, and even active churchgoers we might think we don't need to examine ourselves and consider what we need to do to prepare our hearts for the coming of the Lord. If we can't think of anything, then we might have fallen into that same trap, of presuming that we don't have to make any changes before we come face-to-face with Jesus. The message of the forerunners the prophets and John the Baptist, is before this can happen there must be repentance - giving up on our own efforts and selfishness and turning around, to accept our Saviour, Jesus Christ as Saviour and King.

Whatever the forerunner might be in our lives, it will carry the same life-changing message of John the Baptist, that in Jesus Christ, the Kingdom of Heaven comes to us; and the way to prepare for it is to confess our need for him and accept Him into our hearts.

Thanks be to God. Amen.