

## SERMON PREACHED AT SJH ADVENT 2 YEAR C 9 DECEMBER 2018

What do we hope for? All sorts of things. We may hope for fine weather if we plan to do something outside. We may hope for snow at Christmas – that's what's pictured on Christmas Cards, with a warmly glowing church in a white churchyard, carol singers in scarves carrying a lantern and so on. We may hope for more serious things: recovery from illness, or a particular outcome from a vote in parliament. When hopes get less realistic we might call them wishes. "I wish I could afford a holiday," somebody might say. Sometimes we look backwards rather than forwards: I wish that such and such had never happened...I wish that things were as they used to be... .

The first reading today comes from the book of the prophet Baruch. It's not in our Old Testament, but in that group of books between the Old and the New Testaments in some bibles: the Apocrypha. Baruch, whose name means 'Blessed', is called a prophet, though more accurately he was the prophet Jeremiah's secretary. (No, they didn't have typewriters in those days: he was secretary in the sense of being Jeremiah's scribe and assistant.) The book is set in the early years of the Jewish people's exile in Babylon, and is sent from there by Baruch to the Jews who'd not been deported – mainly the less important ones. They'd been left in Jerusalem and the surrounding country just to keep things going. The passage we've read today is full of hope. The remnant of the people left in Jerusalem is to expect the exiles to return:

Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height; look towards the east, and see your children gathered from west and east...they went out from you on foot, led away by their enemies; but God will bring them back to you,... .

Baruch's words have various associations. I wonder if they were an inspiration for the carol *People, look east. The time is near...* . Baruch tells the Jews left behind to take off the garment of sorrow and put on the robe of righteousness and diadem of glory. That makes me think of the parable of the prodigal son who, when he returns to his family, is clothed in a robe and given a ring to wear. Baruch's image of mountains being flattened and valleys filled up to make an easy way for the exiles to return is also found in the prophet Isaiah. It may remind you of the aria in Handel's *Messiah*, 'Every valley shall be exalted.'

This image is chosen by S. Luke in his description of John the Baptist's rôle. He is the voice crying out in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled..." and so on. The image of the way of the Lord has more than one meaning. It may be a way for people to follow as they return to their homeland. The idea is that God enables exiles to make

the journey. It may also be the way for God to come to his people, perhaps pictured as God returning to his temple. Sometimes the two are combined: at the end of the passage from Baruch the picture is of God leading Israel with joy along the way.

S. Luke uses the picture mainly in the sense of God coming to people. 'All flesh shall see the salvation of God,' is the last phrase of the gospel reading. That is a powerful statement. It is the gospel hope! Christians believe that God has acted in history to save the world. S. Luke and the other gospel writers describe how this has happened. Obviously the coming of Jesus, his teaching, his death and resurrection, are central to this good news, but today our focus is on John the Baptist. The initiative comes from God, but John is portrayed as someone open and receptive. The word of God came to John in the wilderness. Our thoughts are drawn to the time the Israelites spent in the wilderness, having been led out of Egypt by Moses. In the wilderness God revealed himself to them and gave them his law. It was an experience that formed them as a people. John was in the wilderness: a place without the distractions and the props of normal life; a place where he could not hide from himself, or God. And God spoke to him.

Two things stand out today amongst the many we can learn from John the Baptist. The first concerns our experiences of wilderness. I'm not suggesting we should become hermits on Cannock Chase. But we could benefit greatly from making time and space to be on our own with God, away from 'phones, television, washing up to do in the sink, other people to chat to and so on. We might find somewhere at home to do this, though that may not be easy. We might find a quiet place outside, or go on a walk. We might spend a few minutes in church before or after one of the quiet weekday masses. It is also possible that we find ourselves in a wilderness not of our own choosing, but because life's events have placed us there – a personal loss, maybe. It's much too simple to say, "Just pray and everything will be all right," but perhaps talking to someone will help us see what our experience reveals about ourselves and God, who is present whether we feel he's there or not. Another of the pictures in the prophets about the way of the Lord is of wilderness becoming fruitful land.

The second thing we can learn from John is what he must have realised in the wilderness: that God's people are called to repent. That's much broader than just thinking of particular sins we have committed and saying, "Sorry." As I said last week, it's about knowing the world is not as God wants it to be, and joining him in his purpose of doing something about it, of turning it around. 'Repent' means 'turn.' Next week's gospel describes John's message of repentance in practical

detail. For now, let us grasp the great hope that God sets before us, that he will lead us on his way of salvation, salvation that all flesh shall see.

[ALL FLESH SEE SALVATION: THEME OF GOSPEL – CF SIMEON’S WORDS, FINAL COMMISSION 24.47].