

John the Baptist to be next Rector of West Hereford?

A sermon for Advent 3, by Canon John Simpson

I've looked at the excellent Parish Profile for West Hereford and the advertisement for a new Team Rector. Were I forty years younger I would be sorely tempted to apply. There's a work to be done, and exciting possibilities and challenges to explore. Let's hope that the right person comes to us, the person of God's choosing and calling.

I wonder what the reaction would be if John the Baptist were to apply? His dress, camel's hair loin cloth, and his diet of locusts and wild honey would not readily appeal to the folk at All Saints and the Café is unlikely to cater for his diet. His preaching was not a Gospel, (Good News) for his sermons accused and challenged. Would our congregations be ready to be addressed as "You brood of vipers"? (Luke 3: 7). If you stayed to listen you would hear: Share your clothes and your food, no fiddling your income tax, don't bully, don't blackmail people into doing what you want, and don't ask for a wage increase. (Luke 3:13). But perhaps that is what needs to be said. His pastoral care might be doubtful as well.

But one thing about John the Baptist might appeal. He called himself "A Voice." "I am a voice crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way for the Lord." John 1:23

When Humpty Dumpty wanted to get his message to the little fishes he screamed his orders at the messenger:

I said it very loud and clear

I went and shouted in his ear.

Today the loudest kind of shouting is done by advertisements. This silent shouting is quite as deafening to the mind as the other is to the ear. I cannot find any evidence that Jesus ever attempted to force his message upon those who did not want to hear it. Christians unfortunately have not always shown the same forbearance.

His cousin, John the Baptist, was not averse to shouting. He was determined to play his part preparing people to hear the message of Jesus. He was strongly against the abuse of power. Repentance was the real way to prepare for the coming of the promised Messiah.

There's some strong meat that we are given in these Sundays before Christmas, judgement takes a very prominent place in Bible readings and hymns. The challenge is there:

Ye saints who toil below,

Adore your heavenly king,

And onward as you go

Some joyful anthem sing;

Take what he gives

And praise him still,

Through good and ill.

Really? Because we are not allowed to sing hymns as a congregation at the moment, reading the words may make us concentrate more.

John the Baptist is not my favourite saint, but I do know that I need to hear his challenge and to be ready to greet Christ, and to do all I am able to prepare others to see Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

We prepare for Christ once more this Christmas - it will be different...

We prepare for a new Team Rector - it won't be John the Baptist - but with her or him, and with our team let us help to bring the light of Christ into people's lives. I love the Advent hymn written by Robert Willis, Dean of Canterbury, and once Dean of Hereford. Here's the first verse:

In a world where people walk in darkness

Let us turn our faces to the light

To the light of God revealed in Jesus

To the Daystar scattering our night.

For the light is stronger than the darkness

And the day will overcome the night

Though the shadows linger all around us

Let us turn our faces to the light.