



SUNDAY 4 DECEMBER 2022

DIOCESE OF Hexham & Newcastle

The Parishes of: Bishop Auckland || Newton Aycliffe & Shildon || Willington
Crook, Tow Law & Wolsingham || Tudhoe || Coundon, Ferryhill & Windlestone

ESCOMB PARTNERSHIP NOTE

2nd Sunday of Advent (Year A) Matthew 3: 1-12

The question was uncomfortable. No, really, it was hurtful. All he asked was 'What do you think you're doing?'

It was an imaginary conversation with John the Baptist, someone I'd admired for some years, but I'd been admiring from a distance – like most of us do. And yet he's personally and deliberately unsettling. A man with a mission. The look on his face challenges any sense of complacency. He does not want me to fool myself thinking I'm an exception to those needing to hear his message.

Misinformation and fake news are not recent visitors on the world stage. A pretty classical survey of how any of our congregations have understood about following Jesus will furnish us with some interesting patterns of belief and practice. We haven't always got the message hot and vibrant off the press and we all process it differently.

But you couldn't ignore John the Baptist. His was a new voice, in your face, straight-talking and challenging. 'Don't fool yourself', I imagine him saying, 'Outward compliance is insufficient unless it carries your heartfelt intentions. You can't pull a fast one on God'. John comes fresh out of the desert, not distracted by things that don't matter, his message honed and clear. Stop procrastinating, get yourself sorted.

We're reluctant to let things go. But there's no progress without change. It can be a struggle if we're uncertain about what to do. It may be comforting to know we're only confused if we're learning something. We must ponder on our experience and see what life is saying to us and about us. The story of our life is unfolding. There's something important happening and it's a shame to miss it. Doing nothing is not an option. Justice and peace don't happen by themselves.

Why not use Advent to start thinking? Before the millennium some folks saw preparing for a new century as a kind of Advent, a preparation time facing the future. The burning issue of our age is about caring for the Earth. Talk and promises have had paltry consequences against what's needed. Our lives can be an Advent invitation to repair damage, cut down on the unnecessary and eliminate excess. God entrusted his creation to us and there are enough wake-up calls to remind us of Jesus' shout to 'stay awake'. Sleepwalking into next year is not on.

This is always a busy time of year and hard for many people. How do you want to spend the next three weeks? What would John say about what you have in mind? He doesn't take prisoners!



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A word from Pope Francis

Inner strength, as the work of grace, prevents us from becoming carried away by the violence that is so much a part of life today, because grace defuses vanity and makes possible meekness of heart. The saints do not waste energy complaining about the failings of others; they can hold their tongue before the faults of their brothers and sisters, and avoid the verbal violence that demeans and mistreats others. Saints hesitate to treat others harshly; they consider others better than themselves (cf. Philippians 2:3)

It is not good when we look down on others like heartless judges, lording it over them and always trying to teach them lessons. That is itself a subtle form of violence. Saint John of the Cross proposed a different path: 'Always prefer to be taught by all, rather than to desire teaching even the least of all'. And he added advice on how to keep the devil at bay. 'Rejoice in the good of others as if it were your own, and desire that they be given precedence over you in all things; this you should do wholeheartedly. You will thereby overcome evil with good, banish the devil, and possess a happy heart. Try to practice this all the more with those who least attract you. Realise that if you do not train yourself in this way, you will not attain real charity or make any progress in it'.

- Rejoice and Be Glad paras 116-117