

Advent 2

A sermon preached by the Rt Revd Andrew Rumsey at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Sunday 5 December 2021

Reading: Luke 3:1-6

Well good morning, it is super to be with you. Hard to believe, but we are already at the Second Sunday in Advent already and that means John the Baptist is our focus. I always feel a twinge of unease when speaking about him, as it reminds me of the time when, as a naïve young clergyman, I decided to spice up my Advent sermon by purchasing half a dozen real locusts for a kind of 'show and tell' in the congregation. It didn't end well, is all I shall say at this juncture. No such surprises here this morning, you'll be glad to know...

*As it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,
"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.*

I must say that am just loving my first trip to Guernsey. On my tour of the island yesterday morning, I noticed a curious and rather amusing signpost that had four different arrows, pointing 'this way, that way, another way, wrong way'.... And today we consider John the Baptist as one who directed, or re-directed, God's people in the way they should go. John was really the last of the great prophets – almost a hinge between old and new Testaments. And he arrives on the scene in Luke's Gospel quoting Isaiah's heralding announcement of a way home for God's exiled people, seven hundred years before. And at that time, Israel was a very long way from home: their country had been invaded; they had been taken prisoner and carried off to captivity in Babylon. And so, the prophet was looking ahead to a new future for God's people Israel - asking them to imagine a huge area of wild countryside where a great highway will be built: a highway for God to lead his people back home.

And so John appears, echoing Isaiah's great surveying verses as he imagines the wilderness bisected by a new route back to God.

For some reason this passage always reminds me of the A303 in Wiltshire. I don't know how well you know that county but it's where I live and minister. At the heart of Wiltshire, like a yolk to an egg is the massive expanse of Salisbury Plain, and so every route is criss-crossed with tank crossings and firing ranges. It's a wild and wonderful place. And cutting through it is the A303, that famously passes by Stonehenge on its way East to West. When first conceived the A303 was known as the New Direct Route and promised to carry passengers to the South-west by mail coach at a terrifyingly brisk 15 miles per hour. Interestingly, drivers on the stretch past Stonehenge rarely exceed that to this day...

A new direct route home, across the wilderness of our lives and all their crooked ways: this is what both Isaiah and John are heralding, and the people are to prepare the ground, as it were, by a simple act of repentance: a turning around of their lives in baptism, for the forgiveness of sins. And he gave this invitation from the wilderness itself, as a sign – living in the wild, to illustrate where this route would begin.

John is a remarkable figure to feature in our preparations for Christmas, when you think about it: whereas we tend to prepare by getting more stuff in, John's message was basically strip it all away; turn your lives around and you might just be ready for the man who is about to arrive. (when people ask John how they should get ready for Christ's coming, he replies: 'anyone who has two coats should give away one'...). In contrast to the stuffed and cuddly figure of Father Christmas, John the Baptist is not the one you'd go and see to get an extra present, basically – queue up at his grotto and he'll ask you what you can give away... He's not Santa Claus – he's the Anti-Claus, if anything; and unsurprisingly he doesn't feature much on our Christmas cards!

But while his message is almost severe and certainly uncomfortable, it is just the one we need. One of the most tiresome things on a long journey is to see on one's satnav that reverse arrow indicating you have not arrived at your destination but need to turn entirely around and head back another way. Spiritually, this is what John is indicating: repent – turnabout and head another way - the way that will become clear any moment now. And of course, when Christ came, his followers began to find that the way he lived (and especially the way he died) had a remarkable effect on their lives, enabling them to find their way home to God. Almost as if the cross on which Jesus died was like a signpost – showing us how lost we are and where to go from here.

So, at Advent, dear friends, we re-orientate our lives by his compass and consider – much as we do in Lent – what we need to turn away from, in order to face the right direction. What that might mean for you, only you will know: it might mean addressing certain habits of thought or behaviour, ways that veer you off from the new direct route of Christ. It will also mean turning *to* Christ afresh, in wonder and worship, for he is nothing less than the way of life.