

Advent 3

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Sunday 16 December 2018

Readings: Philippians 4 vv 4-7 and Luke 3 vv 7-18

There is much to worry and concern those who are inclined to be worriers at the moment. Leaving on one side the worries that have always been around, for family members and for friends and for ourselves, we know so much more about things to worry about. There is speculation and gossip, often ill-informed and sometimes frankly malicious, in the conventional media and in social media. France has seen riots on the streets of Paris and yet another lone gunman murdering and terrifying people in Strasbourg. We have come through a rather extraordinary week in British politics, with both Theresa May continuing as the Prime Minister and continuing lack of certainty about how the United Kingdom will leave the European Union on 29 March next year. We are facing the real consequences of climate change, which cannot be dismissed as a mere theory. Wars and civil unrest continue in too many places. We really do not know what to make of President Trump in the United States and President Putin in Russia. And so on and so on.

And if you weren't worried before I started to speak a couple of minutes ago, I apologise if you are now. And yet St Paul tells the Philippians, and us, 'Do not worry about anything.'

It is an instruction that seems so much more easily said than done. Of course, at one level, it is right and proper to acknowledge that God is sovereign. But all around us we see the consequences of the exercise of the free will which God, in his sovereign wisdom, has given to human beings. Whilst there should be no need to worry, it is all too easy to keep theory and practice in separate compartments.

We will not be cheered immediately by what we hear about St John the Baptist in the gospel reading. John does not massage the egos of those who are listening to him. He is blunt and brutal. He addresses those coming to be baptised by him as 'You brood of vipers'. He tells them that they can't rest on the laurels of their inherited place in God's chosen people. It is not enough for them simply to say, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'. This is essentially meaningless unless they are bearing 'good fruit' – a theme to which Jesus returns in his farewell conversation with his disciples as they share the Last Supper. In other words, it is what they do, how they conduct themselves, that is important. There is no point in clinging on to ancestry or inheritance or even particular roles and offices. 'Bear fruits worthy of repentance', says John. We might expect the crowds to turn around and walk away in disgust. Were this to happen today, there would be a flood of complaints on social media by people claiming that their feelings had been hurt and that John didn't understand them.

But that is of course the point. John understood them only too well. He got to the nub of the problem. And the people who heard John knew this. They could see that he was sincere. He was telling the truth. They knew that they were guilty as charged, because they ask John a question: 'What then should we do?' John gives them practical advice about how they should conduct themselves, tailoring the advice to the different categories of people who presented themselves to him – the crowds in general and the specific groups mentioned, the tax collectors and the soldiers. Generosity and integrity are the watchwords.

And John behaves himself with integrity. He will not be seduced by the flattery of the crowds, wondering whether he might be the Messiah. He knows that his role is to prepare

the way, as we heard last week in the first six verses of chapter 3, from which today's gospel reading follows on.

Whilst the coming of the Messiah is good news, there are consequences that may be uncomfortable and even unpalatable for some. The good harvest of those bearing good fruit will be celebrated and treasured. But the useless chaff will be burned. The message is uncompromising for those who do not recognise the need for repentance and amendment of life and who will persist in their selfish and self-centred ways.

John was preaching in the wilderness. Just as Luke placed John in history last week, leaving us in no doubt that John was speaking at a particular point in human history, Luke places John firmly in the wilderness, the place where Isaiah had prophesied he would be.

A wilderness is a barren place where there seems to be neither life nor hope, a place where one can easily be lost. It is a place of strange beauty. But unless one is very careful, a wilderness is a place that can provoke fear and anxiety. It is a place where one could rightly be worried.

As we hear John's message to the people who gathered around him in the wilderness, we hear John's words today, not as interesting history, but as living reality. John speaks as much to us as he did to those who heard him in person two thousand years ago. Human nature does not change much. We may live in the light of Christ, but worrying darkness seems so ready to surround and overwhelm us, whether it is fake news or alternate truth; or whether the reality of war and injustice and denial of our responsibility for creation.

Into our anxious reality, Paul speaks clearly. Gaudete. Rejoice.

In his journey of faith, from the persecutor of Christians to the apostle to the Gentiles (as he describes himself in the letter to the Romans), through his dramatic encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, Paul learned to trust God. He had known the discomfort of the thorn in his flesh. And yet the clear evidence of the letter to the Philippians is that he learned to be content, whatever the situation in which he found himself. As one commentator has written, 'For Paul, the absolute belief that there really is no need to worry is hard won from living through the good times and the very, very bad. Paul has learned that God is faithful, and his resurrection perspective helps him to see the challenges of life in the light of eternity.'¹

Not worrying is a gift, one that we need to seek over a lifetime of discipleship, praying that God will work in and through us, to fill us more fully and to immerse ourselves more deeply in the light of Jesus, who alone brings hope and supports us 'all the day long of this troublous life'.

¹ Emma Ineson in *Reflections for Sundays, Year C*; page 28 [Church House Publishing, London, 2018]