

## Advent 2

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Sunday 4 December 2022

*Readings: Isaiah 11.1-10 and Matthew 3.1-12*

There is a strange image for the coming Messiah in the reading today from Isaiah 11: 'A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.'

When a tree is chopped down to a stump, a little shoot starts growing out of it at some point. This is usually an unwanted eyesore. A nuisance. These little shoots that grow out of stumps are known by the unflattering name of 'suckers'. Having these ragged little branches growing out of it makes a tree stump look unkempt and messy.

Israel's enemies had tried every way they knew to seal off the stump of Jesse – the father of King David and the ancestor of the kings of Israel, good and bad. They tried to stop growth through war, slavery, imprisonment and starvation. Jesus' ancestors suffered all this and more. No king had sat on the throne of Israel for generations. And yet, somehow, there is still life stirring in this burnt-out old stump.

Now, in the season of Advent, we see the little tiny shoot begin to sprout. It is fragile. One wrong move and it could die. It is totally defenceless against too much water, too little water, the wrong amount of sunlight or wind.

This is a strange image to use to describe Jesus. He's the new King of Israel, and yet he is described as a fragile branch growing out of an unsightly old stump. It's not a flattering image. It's not triumphant or powerful. But that takes us to the heart of the message of Advent. It is a time when we are invited to come to terms with the profound knowledge that God chose to come amongst his people in a vulnerable state: a defenceless human baby, the little shoot out of the stump, that could be cut down at any moment. And we know that Herod came close to destroying Jesus when he slaughtered the innocent children of Bethlehem in his murderous rage. But Jesus and his parents had escaped to Egypt.

Even in the face of violence, Isaiah can speak of us entering a new era of peace. God's kingdom has arrived. Isaiah paints a picture of what that kingdom is like: 'The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.'

Peace and wholeness. The Kingdom of God has arrived. We are in a safe place. It is safe to be vulnerable, to reach out, to stretch out and grow.

And yet John the Baptist descends like a furious storm in the gospel today. He arrives with locusts and vipers and axes and fire. How does his warlike message of the wrath to come sit alongside the promised peace of the wolf lying down with the lamb?

Remember the image of the shoot growing up out of the stump. Take a step back and consider how that environment was created. A tree had to be chopped down to a stump in order for the new shoot to grow up out of it.

John the Baptist says, 'Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees.' He is the very personification of that message. He has arrived to shock us out of our complacency, to call us to chop down and root out all our old habits of greed and shame and selfishness.

Advent is the beginning of the new church year. It is time to begin with a clean slate. John the Baptist invites us 'to bear fruit worthy of repentance'. What does that mean? All the old ways are to be chopped down and thrown away, making room for the new shoot of Jesse to grow up within us. That is how we prepare the way of the Lord. John the Baptist is not preaching a message of condemnation, but rather a message of liberation, of freedom from the thick, choking undergrowth of sin that has trapped us in misery and hopelessness.

And yet even as he pours down the fire of his words, John also pours out the gentle stream of water on the heads of those who are prepared to seek the Kingdom of God at the River Jordan. John blesses them with the cleansing stream that is a foretaste of the living water that is Jesus. John waters the potential of the believers, anticipating that a new shoot of life will have the chance to blossom and grow.

Once again, the season of Advent gives us the opportunity to go in our hearts and imagination to the River Jordan, seeking once again to cleanse our souls as we prepare for the coming of Jesus at Bethlehem.

In this season of Advent, the season of expectation and possibility, Isaiah invites us to look for a new shoot out of the old stock. Isaiah proclaims that 'on that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious'.

I invite you to welcome the coming Christ, to embrace him within you.

When we do that, we will find ourselves manifesting grace in completely new ways that we never expected, newborn shoots of life growing up to bear good fruit.