

Advent II A

Sunday 4 December 2016

Mariya uMama weThemba Monastery, Grahamstown, South Africa

Isaiah 11:1-10

(Psalm 72:1-7,18-19)

Romans 15:(1-3,)4-13

Matthew 3:1-12

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It's the second Sunday in Advent, and so here's that wild man, John the Baptist, out in the desert, shouting about confession of sins and the need for repentance. He sounds angry; he's threatening wrath to come and going on about axes and fires.

However, the verses from the prophet Isaiah that give John his identity as the voice of one crying out in the wilderness are not angry verses. "Comfort my people;" they say, "bring comfort to them, says your God; speak kindly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her term of bondage is served, her penalty is paid ..."

So, perhaps it is in hope of that comfort that all the people from the surrounding areas stream out to John in the wilderness. Then, there is this verse from one of our Advent hymns:

"The Baptist joys at Jordan's edge;
with urgent force he rends the night.
He challenges the clouded heart:
'Be turned full-face: Behold the Light!'"

The Baptist joys at Jordan's edge. I like to imagine John smiling, with a twinkle in his eye, as he called the Pharisees and Sadducees a bunch of snakes, then sending them off to go and mend their ways before returning for baptism.

I also like to imagine John as a sort of monk. I might be a bit biased in this though.

Of the four Gospels, only Luke tells us anything about John's birth and childhood; the others have him appearing as an adult, as if out of nowhere. Luke ends the description of the early life of John the Baptist with these words: "Meanwhile the child grew up and his spirit grew strong. And he lived in the desert until the day he appeared openly to Israel."

I am told that there were numerous religious communities in the wilderness of Judea. I think it is likely that John was a member of one of these, and that he received his spiritual formation in that hidden context. Certainly, he had learned to listen for the voice of God, and then spoke what he heard. He didn't need to go into the centre; people came to him out on the margins, because they knew that what he had to say was worth hearing.

It is our hope as a monastic community to live our life here with sufficient integrity that we too will receive something to say, something people will find worth making the effort to come out and hear. We want people to have reason to believe us when we tell them God loves them.

The joyful Baptist rends the night with urgent force, challenging clouded hearts to turn full-face towards the light. I like to think of confession as a way of clearing the cloud of sin from the heart, and of repentance as a way of turning towards the light. It is urgent that the people confess and repent, says John, because he has seen a vision of one who is coming and he wants them to be ready to receive him.

Left to themselves, our hearts tend to become clouded by the concerns and distractions of our daily lives. So, in her wisdom, the Church has provided a season of Advent when we are invited to loosen our hold on our preoccupations, that we might receive again the gift of the one who would come to shine his light into our hearts once more.

The coming one is wonderful, says the prophet Isaiah: full of reverence and wisdom and understanding. That one will not judge by appearance or on the basis of hearsay, but will judge the poor with justice and defend the humble in the land. When he is done turning the world as we know it upside down, the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord.

And then the strangest vision. Wolves and lambs living together, calves and lions side by side, with a little child tending them, playing and dancing in safety. No hurt, no harm, on all the holy mountain, when ruthless wickedness has been done away with.

We know that one by the name of Jesus, of course, and he teaches his followers to do as he would do. Communities that form in his name are to be signs of hope, communities in which all are welcomed as all have been made welcome by Christ, as Paul reminds us in his letter to the Romans.

In such communities, members do not indulge their own feelings, seeking only to please themselves. Instead, all support one another in love, each considering their neighbour's good so as to build up the common life, the strong bearing with the susceptibilities of the weaker ones.

While such communities look forward to the ultimate fulfilment of the marvellous vision of Isaiah, in whatever form that will take, they learn perseverance and receive encouragement from the God who is the source of perseverance and encouragement. However diverse they may be and whatever their differences in perspective, the members of such communities learn to live in harmony with one another.

Such communities themselves become signs of the peaceable kingdom that has come among us, as all together give glory to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ with one renewed heart. And so, may God, who is the ground of hope, fill you with all joy and peace as you lead the life of faith, until, by the power of the Holy Spirit, you overflow with hope.

Amen.