

<b>Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> December 2011</b> <b>Grahamstown Cathedral</b> <b>7.30 &amp; 9.30 a.m.</b>		<b>ADVENT 3 – YEAR B</b> <b>EMBER DAY</b>	
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11	Ps 45:1-7	1 Thess 5:16-24	
		John 1:6-8, 19-28	
<b>JESUS IS AMONGST US</b>			

## **FOCUS**

### **The main focus of the sermon**

- Open our eyes to see Jesus amongst us.

## **BODY**

### **Introduction - The key text or story**

“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord’ ” (Jn 1:23).

## **Advent**

This past Friday saw the end of the school year, at last. The academic year is finally over. For our hard-working teachers, the next six weeks represent the best part of the job! Grahamstown is putting on its December dress: jacaranda flowers, quiet streets, empty schools. Many of us have a sense of relief, letting go, as we begin the summer holidays.

It is all too easy, as everything shuts down for the holidays, to lose the deep spiritual significance of these weeks leading up to Christmas. Which is why this season of Advent is so important: it says to us all – catch your breath. Slow down – but don’t switch off. As the funny monkey in *Lion King* says, “Look deeper.” Look beyond the decorations and the excitement, and the holiday spirit and the new year just around the corner. Hear the eternal themes and message. What is God saying to us at this time?

While the world is preparing for the “Festive Season”, we as Christians are called to prepare for the coming of Christ. Bernard of

Clairvaux said that Advent focuses our attention on the three comings of Christ: past, present and future.

His first coming was as a baby at Christmas. He came to live, die and rise again as our redemption. His final coming, in the future, at the end of time, will be as King and Lord and Judge. He comes to us in the present, in our daily lives, as we invite him into our hearts. He comes to us in the bread and the wine, the sacrament of the Eucharist. He comes as our rest and our consolation.

## **John the Baptist**

Each Sunday in Advent has its special focus (the second coming of Christ; the prophets who pointed to Jesus; the role of Mary his mother.) Today our focus is on the ministry of John the Baptist, the one who came to prepare the way; who pointed others to Jesus, who said of Jesus, “He must increase; I must decrease.” (Jn 3:29-30).

John is a model for ministry, an example for all who exercise any ministry, whether ordained or lay, in the life of the church. That is why this Sunday in Advent is an Ember Day, when we ask God, in the words of the Collect, to “inspire all who minister in your church to prepare for Christ’s coming again by turning us from disobedience to your loving service...” (APB p 152).

And we are reminded, in the words of our first reading, what it is that we are called and sent to do:

“to announce good news to the humble<sup>1</sup>/oppressed<sup>2</sup>, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to captives, release to those in prison....” (Isaiah 61:1-2)

John is described very simply as “a man sent from God” (Jn 1:6). His mission, his task: to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus Christ. When asked who he was, he used words from the prophet Isaiah:

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<sup>1</sup> *Revised English Bible*

<sup>2</sup> *New Revised Standard Version*

“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord’ ”. (Jn 1:23)

Prepare the way. Open the doors. Straighten out the path. Get rid of all that will hinder or block the coming of Christ.

He was a controversial figure who called people back to their spiritual roots. And he ruffled feathers. He spoke of things like honesty and corruption, purity of life, and personal morality. He told those in government service to be honest in their dealings with the people. He told soldiers not to bully the civilian populace. And he told Herod, the king, that he had done wrong, broken God’s law, by marrying his brother’s wife.

People responded to his message of uncompromising repentance and radical change. They came in their thousands to be baptised. When asked why he was baptising, John answered,

“I baptise with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me....” (Jn 1:26)

## **Open our eyes to see the Lord amongst us**

There are times when we need to hear a clear challenge, a clear word. Advent is such a time. The message: Be prepared. Open our eyes. Don’t continue to live as if there is nothing beyond what we see. This is a time for radical change. The world as we know it will not last for ever; the Lord is about to come to us once again. But the Lord also comes amongst us now, to set people free, to bring release to the captives, to restore the ruined cities of our lives, our families, the church, our communities. Let us open our eyes to see him.

And let us share in the mission and work of Christ, to bring freedom, to bring hope and healing, to restore the ruined cities (Isa 61:4); like John the Baptist, to make straight the way for the Lord, to point to Jesus. What has God called you and me to do? In what way is God calling us to be part of this work of healing and restoration? How have we responded to that call?

Two examples of a call to repentance, two examples of Jesus amongst us, two examples of a modern-day John the Baptist, a “John-the-Baptist” voice, moment:

There have been calls for radical action as the UN Climate Change Conference (COP17) came to an end this past week. There is amongst many a growing sense of despair at the greed and blindness that is destroying our environment – whether it is the slaughter of rhinos here in the Eastern Cape, or the pollution of water and air by industry, or the over-consumption of our natural resources. In his song, *The funfair of the damned*, Chris Mann, Professor of Poetry at Rhodes, and a member of the Cathedral, puts it like this<sup>3</sup>:

The horsemen of Apocalypse  
are riding through the sky.  
The coalmen on the gold course say,  
‘This climate talk’s a lie.’

The carbon in the atmosphere  
is making earth a hell.  
The oil-men drilling land and sea  
drill oil well after well.

*Isn’t it time to change the music  
isn’t it time to change the band,  
isn’t it time to change the management  
in the funfair of the damned.*

The planes and cars and factories  
are poisoning the sky.  
The business folk and bankers say,  
‘We’ll fix this – by and by.’

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<sup>3</sup> The song was composed specially for the multi-faith rally held the day before COP17 began. It was performed at the rally by Chris as part of the band, *Corporate Revolt*.

And you and me and everyone  
and no one is to blame  
when nothing's sacred on the earth  
more than the money game.

*Isn't it time to change the music  
isn't it time to change the band,  
isn't it time to change the management  
in the funfair of the damned.<sup>4</sup>*

Where is Jesus amongst us in all this? He is in the passion and concern that many have; in the efforts of people to reverse global warming; in the commitment to consume less. There is a John-the-Baptist call to repentance, to change the way we live, the way we use the natural resources of this world. For all our concern in our country with race and colour, we now need to become green people. And I hope that as a cathedral we can explore seriously how we can conserve energy and consume less. Jesus is amongst us in this call for change. COP17 has been our John the Baptist.

The second example is more personal. Some of you are aware that my father's health is not good. Old age is difficult. I see Jesus amongst us in the love and care of so many, for my father, for my mother, for me. Times of sickness, serious illness, are a John-the-Baptist voice to us, a wake-up call, a time to reflect, a time when we are made aware of just how fragile life is, a time to say the things that are really important – things such as “Thank you.” “We love you.” “We appreciate all that you have done, all that you have been to us.”

And a time to be grateful – for people sent (perhaps by God) at the right time, to be there, to be a source of comfort and support and strength; to be grateful for the small mercies, for the privilege of journeying together through sickness and health, through life and even in the face of death.

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<sup>4</sup> © Chris Mann 2011. Used by permission.

## CONCLUSION

Let us use these last two weeks of Advent to repent; to see Jesus amongst us; to hear the radical voice of John the Baptist to make straight the way for the Lord; to be signs, pointers, to Jesus.

“May the God who gives us peace make you holy in every way and keep your whole being – spirit, soul and body – free from every fault at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you will do it, because he is faithful.” (1 Thess 5:23-34)