

Advent II (December 4, 2011)

From today's Epistle: *"But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home."*

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Sitting in my office yesterday afternoon, I was seeking inspiration for a sermon I had begun compiling a week and half ago, but which I had re-written several times over. I felt like I was no further ahead than before I had begun. And then I idly and randomly opened my book *A Treasury of Anglican Art*, which is a picture-book—picture-books are my favourite kind of book, by the way (I don't like books where too many words get in the way)—and I opened to an art-piece painted in the 1970's for a floundering mission church in the States. It was St. John the Baptist looking wild, unkempt, standing

in the middle of the desert. John the Baptizer clearly stood in contrast to good, upright society. And then it hit me. Our message is one of contrast.

“There is something wrong with our economy, there is something wrong with our government, there is something wrong with the system. It’s time we let them know that we see it and that we won’t sit and let it be. It’s time to be political! We are the 99%!”

So reads the “About” section on the Facebook page called “Occupy North Bay.” The Occupy Movement, a concept created by a Canadian activist group, is a worldwide protest against economic and social inequalities. You might have seen people camping and protesting in Lee Park in recent times. This is a gesture of moving away from worldly comfort towards worldly discomfort; it is a statement against the economic elite and a stand in solidarity with ordinary citizens. “There is

something wrong,” is the refrain. Whatever your opinion regarding the Occupy Movement, it seems to me that there is an intention here of setting up a contrast. Although some criticize the protestors for being hypocritical, they have, in at least some respects, withdrawn from society, living in places like Lee Park, and in other public places around the world. In their intended message of contrast, in a way they echo the message of John the Baptist.

In the Gospel Lesson this morning, John the Baptist is enticing the civilized to leave society and venture into the desert. Drove of people are drawn to John and his message of repentance. In that picture of John the Baptist in my picture-book, he is pointing at his head. You might think that perhaps he is acknowledging

that he is a bit unstable mentally. But this is not the case. John is witnessing to the meaning of repentance: a change and renewal of the mind. Yes, it really is possible to change your mind—if you allow your mind to be changed, that is—if you allow for the possibility that you don't have it all figured out, and that you never will.

We hear the Prophet Isaiah in the First Lesson heralding a message of comfort to those afflicted by their sin: acknowledging the reality of sin means acknowledging that there is a need for change; for a change of mind; for a change of life; for repentance. In other words, it is an acknowledgement that “there is something wrong.” Isaiah offers a message of hope based upon a contrast from affliction to comfort. The curious thing is that the Prophet's understanding of

affliction and comfort is in contrast to the world's. God is calling His people to leave Babylon and to return to Jerusalem. The Israelites are being called away from their exile into godlessness and they are being called back to their former life centred on the Lord. Exile into Babylon was not bad news for the earthly lives of the Israelites—in fact, they enjoyed much wealth and prosperity. To suggest they leave it all behind and return to their homeland, and labour to restore God's Temple, meant a weaning away from the world and a latching onto the Creator God. Isaiah understood an anchoring into the ways of the world to be an affliction and a return to spiritual-centered living to be a comfort. It meant a change from relying on the ways of the world to relying on the ways of God. The message here is that

the tantalizing world withers and fades while God's word endures forever. This is a contrast indeed.

Isaiah is calling for preparations to be made for the Lord's coming through the desert. There needs to be a contrast of hill and valley—what was up must come down, what was down must be built up. We all have needs for contrasting change in our lives; we all live in a desert of sorts, and we all need the Lord to come and clean us out and place us on the straight road to recovery. If we are lowered in dejection and depression, we need to be raised up. If we are raised up on a mighty pedestal of self-importance, we need to be lowered down. And all this happens in a journey of faith when we turn to God to do this work within us to change us for the better—giving comfort to our afflicted souls.

Year after year our habit is to decry the commercialization of the Christmas season, which, in the secular and commercial world, begins several weeks before the actual first day of Christmas, December 25th. After the first day of Christmas, another season of sales begins, and Christmas is considered over by the world-at-large. And yet as a Church we are meant to stand in contrast to the world. We are meant to hold fast to the season of active waiting—the season of Advent—which can easily become depreciated when we give into the pressures of a secular celebration of Christmas. While the pressures of the world surround us, and while we can rail against them, we vote with how we invest ourselves and our resources in the time leading up to Christmas and in the Christmas season itself.

So what is our witness of contrast here at St. John's Church? If we are going to be relevant to the world, if we are to thrive as a church and as a people, we must stand in contrast to the world. We must offer other-worldliness; we must offer the announcement that the Kingdom of Heaven is near us and among us, and that must be our message and our purpose—drawing people away from destruction and towards this contrast of life and love.

That picture of John the Baptist, along with a couple others, draws hundreds of people annually to that once-floundering church in Beaver Creek, North Carolina. Are we afraid of floundering? Do not be afraid, Jesus tells us time and again, for your time and resources are wasted by investing in fear—rather, step

out in faith and trust in the Lord to provide. Do not look down, look up. Change where you are looking and let there be a contrast in your focus. The churches that focus inwardly on self-interest and self-survival are the ones that flounder. The churches that focus outwardly on mission, on drawing others to God, are the ones that prosper. Let us choose together to be a church of contrast, and let us celebrate the Kingdom of God that is in our midst, to which God calls all of us and all His people now and always.

Now to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost, be ascribed all honour, power, glory, might, majesty and dominion, both now and for evermore.

Father A. E. Nussey