



Second Sunday in Advent

Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright



Sunday 10 December 2023

READINGS

Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2,8-13; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8

John the Baptist

Why do we value Scripture? This may seem like a silly question with an obvious answer, this being that, as Christians, we believe Scripture to be the inspired Word of God. It speaks to us, to guide us, inspire us, and instruct us.

Certainly, during my theological studies in my early twenties, what intrigued and excited me about the Bible, about Scripture, was the sense that, when reading it, God was indeed saying something deeply profound, not just to me at a personal level, but about the world at large, and about God's plan of salvation. And I think this sense or feeling is heightened particularly during the season of Advent. As we anticipate the Advent of Christ's return, our readings are filled with apocalyptic images of the close of the age and associated events.

On the second Sunday of Advent, we focus typically on the figure of John the Baptist. As we do so, it may be helpful to consider Jesus' relationship to John, as well as some of the eschatological beliefs attendant to the context of Jesus and John. Is it not interesting that the closing verses of the Old Testament, the closing verses of Malachi, prophesy the return of Elijah at the great and terrible day of the Lord? Some four hundred years later, during the ministry of Jesus, he tells us that John the Baptist, as forerunner of the Messiah, is Elijah returned.

The social and political circumstances of the context in which Jesus and John operated were certainly fraught with tension, and were followed, almost immediately, by great social and political upheaval. No more than forty years after the earthly ministry of Jesus much of Jerusalem, including the second temple, was destroyed. This destruction, as well as that brought about by the Bar Kokhba revolt some years later, resulted in widespread displacement of Jews from the region. Some of these events were reflected in last week's readings, and all of this goes a long way in explaining why there were such fervent, and varied, beliefs in Messianic figures meant to appear at the time.

Jesus tells us in Matthew 11 that John is the Elijah who was to come, though John himself denies that he is Elijah in the Gospel of John. It seems likely, if not certain, that Jesus was initially a disciple of John the Baptist, this because of what baptism signified in antiquity and in ancient Judaism and because of the embarrassment of Matthew and Luke about the fact that John baptised Jesus. The Gospel of John too seems to suggest that Jesus was John's disciple where the discussion between John and his disciples

indicates competition between Jesus and John, due to the fact that Jesus was now starting his own ministry and was baptising more converts than John.

All of this is set against the backdrop of a plethora of eschatological belief and expectation. We have mentioned the expected return of Elijah (supposedly because Elijah never died but was translated into heaven), there is indication of some form of return for Jeremiah, someone referred to as the Prophet. There were also traditions around Moses (whose burial site was never located) and Enoch (also who was supposed not to have died) and who was identified in later Jewish traditions as the Son of Man, and then transformed into the angel Metatron. Within ancient Judaism there is in fact evidence for belief in at least four Messiah's, this based partly on Zechariah 1 which refers to four craftsmen or blacksmiths. They included the Messiah ben Yosef, or Suffering Messiah, the Messiah ben David (the Davidic Messiah in the line or lineage of David), Elijah, and someone referred to as the Priest of Righteousness.

Thrown into this mix we have the very enigmatic figure of the Son of Man, who first appears in Daniel 6. When Jesus asks his disciples who the people say the Son of Man is, they say that some identify him as John the Baptist, some as Elijah, some as Jeremiah, and some as another prophet. Rudolf Bultmann, the preeminent Lutheran theologian of the last century, famously and controversially, maintained that Jesus understood the Son of Man to be someone other than himself. When the Son of Man appears before the Ancient of Days in Daniel 7, the Ancient of Days is described as having "clothing as white as snow, the hair of his head like pure wool" (Daniel 7:9). When the Son of Man appears in the opening scene of Revelation, his hair is described as being as "white as white wool, white as snow" (Revelation 1:14). There is also apparently a variant reading of the Septuagint which equates the Son of Man with the Ancient of Days.

Now we know that the context of the Early Church, many of these terms or eschatological personas coalesced in the figure of Jesus. But this cursory assessment shows us how much ambiguity and fluidity there was both in early Judaism and early Christianity around eschatological beliefs. The first generation of Christians all believed that Christ would return within their lifetime and so the leaders of the Church faced a theological crisis when people within this generation began to die without Christ's return having taken place.

Our New Testament reading this week from 2 Peter, speaks about hastening the coming of the Day of the Lord (2 Peter 3:12). Whether or not it is possible to hasten Christ's return, I'm sure many people following world events and especially those in the Middle East might be thinking, "Now sure would be a good time!" As Fr Dave mentioned last week, none of us knows the point at which, or indeed, the manner in which, Christ will return. We do believe though, as Christians, that during Advent we are meant to prepare for Christ's return. And so, as we do so, let us pray as Paul did in closing his first letter to the Corinthians, saying: "Maranatha!" "Come, Lord!" Amen.