

Sunday 13 December 2020

Advent 3

A time for humility

God, we come to you in our waiting.

We wait with impatience:

we rush around, preparing for the festivities,
not leaving the space to prepare our hearts.

God, help us to wait in hope.

As Christmas approaches the level of anticipation rises. Like young children, we look forward to the gift of God.

61 The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;

² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;

³ to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.

⁴ They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.

(Isaiah 61:1–4)

This traditional reading for the 3rd Sunday in Advent points to the coming of Jesus, but it also reminds us of John, the forerunner, who selflessly announces Jesus as the promised Messiah.

⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

¹⁹ This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" ²⁰ He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." ²¹ And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." ²² Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

²³ He said,
 "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,
 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' "
as the prophet Isaiah said. (John 1:6-8, 19-23)

John's only concern is to 'testify to the light' (8). He is not interested in his own status or reputation, he simply wishes to tell all who will listen about Jesus. He says he is no more than a lone voice in the vast emptiness of the desert calling out in what may seem to be a futile attempt to make his message known.

It would have been easy for John to accept one or more of the titles other people handed to him. Maybe if he had claimed to be Elijah returned, or the prophet like Moses foretold centuries earlier (cf Deuteronomy 18:15-18), he would have had an even larger and possibly more attentive following. But John is not interested. Only one thing matters to him: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30)

When I think of John, his single-mindedness and his humility in the face of popular acclaim and pressure, I am challenged in my own witness. Is my first and only concern really that Jesus should be made known? Jesus himself tells me that I should, "Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness." (Matthew 6:33) How will I strive for this in the coming days?

We pause and pray, asking God to empower us to follow John's example of humility, making Jesus known in all we do and say.

Pause and pray

John's humility as the forerunner of Jesus inspires us. Paul's words, as a follower of Jesus instructs and encourages us.

⁵We do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. ⁶For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Corinthians 4:5f)

And as we wait may we know the hope of God this Advent.

May I be filled with hope, Lord,
 because you sent your Son to rescue me,
 because Jesus is the centrepiece of everything.
May the hope I have
 be life-transforming,
 be infectious,
 be the driving force behind everything I do and say.
Amen.