

Advent III

15th December 2019 Sermon by Bishop Richard Harries

St Mary's Barnes

There is a strong contrast isn't there between the turbulence and intense emotion of the last few days and where we are now with our hymns and prayers and readings? Here for a short hour we leave the struggle for earthly power to enter God's eternal kingdom ruled only by love, with its sublime peace and joy. We inhabit both worlds, so let's reflect for a moment on the relationship between the two.

The world Jesus entered was even more politically turbulent than our own. The country was under enemy occupation and violence was simmering just below the surface. This erupted in AD 70 when a major revolt led to the destruction of the temple and then again, some years later when the whole of Jerusalem was flattened and turned into a Roman City, Aelia Capitolina. Indeed, Jesus had won the heart of at least one of these revolutionaries in his own time, Simon the Zealot. It was in this world John the Baptist came proclaiming that God's kingdom was about to dawn and calling people to repent. Jesus drawn by his renewal movement came to be baptised and in a decisive moment "This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased" realised he was the one called to bring in this kingdom. As we heard in today's Gospel John wondered if he really was the one and from prison sent his followers to enquire. Jesus sent a message back to say that the all the signs of the kingdom were now to be seen, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers^[c] are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." God's rule was indeed breaking into this world through his words and actions. But with the crucifixion all this seem to come to an end. But it didn't. His followers met Christ again risen from the dead to a universal contemporaneity. They were deeply convinced that his kingdom had indeed come. Not yet in a form for everyone to see, but in his life-a

life wholly given over to his heavenly father, a life he came to share with the whole of humanity, beginning with them.

That life has been shared with us. We have been drawn into, called into, that same kingdom of love. That is why we stand apart for a while from that turbulent world of politics seeing it now from a very different perspective. Important, yes, for some of us here, very important, but penultimate, not ultimate, for standing over it is the blessing and judgement of God, in relation to whom it finds its proper place and meaning.

The key figure after Christ himself on this third Sunday in Advent is always John the Baptist, not a person who figures very prominently in our imagination today but hugely significant in the eyes of the early church. If you go into an Orthodox Church, on the large screen of icons which divide the congregation from the altar, on either side of Christ are pictured Mary and John, holding out their arms in a posture of deesis or pleading to Christ on behalf of humanity. The words of Jesus in today's Gospel about him are thrilling

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸ What then did you go out to see? Someone^[d] dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. ⁹ (John was of course in a royal prison) What then did you go out to see? A prophet?^[e] Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written,

'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.'

It is that theme- "who will prepare a way before you" which provides the main image of today's fine collect when we prayed

"Grant that the ministers and stewards of your mysteries

May likewise so prepare and make ready your way.”

This is the image and prayer which defines our role as Christians, as we relate to the wider world in which we are set. We are to prepare and make ready the way. We are all, clergy and lay people alike, ministers and stewards of the divine mystery. We are all called to prepare and make ready the way. Only God can give people the gift of faith, only the Holy Spirit can touch their hearts. But we can prepare and make ready the way by the authenticity of our lives and the words we speak.

As Christians we live in two worlds at once. We are citizens, most of us, of the United Kingdom, and that is a good thing to be. We are also, as St Paul wrote, citizens of heaven. That is our prime loyalty; sisters and brothers of Christ the Kingdom which rules in our hearts. But we also live in the ordinary world, a world which has fallen away from the goodness of its creator in sin and strife, lies and ruthless self-seeking; and the church, in so far as it is a human institution, is part of that fallen world.

So, we always have a double perspective. On the one hand feeling alienated by that world, not least perhaps in the recent election, but knowing that we live in it, that we have to witness within it.

For, whatever we feel about the election result the problems of that world remain as they were before-A grotesque and growing gap between the rich and poor, in a global economy dominated by a financial elite, endemic corruption, looming climate catastrophe to which we are too slow responding, massive abuse of human rights in more than half the countries of the world, family disfunction in ours. On the other hand, we know that this is still God’s good world, created and redeemed by him. A world over which God grieves every moment of every day. A world in which he is ceaselessly at work seeking to bring something good out of the mess we make of it; a world over which hovers his blessing and judgement. We are called to stay at our post in that world recognising and responding to these issues as best we can. We sorrow with that world, and we stand within it, but with our lives rooted in that other world, the divine kingdom of

God's love, from which, Christ promised, nothing would take away. And as this morning in this place we lift that world in prayer, we rejoice especially that we live first of all in that eternal kingdom.

Then we go out from here to read the newspapers and watch TV and talk about it all. And however pleased or dismayed we might be, however conscious of how far the world has gone astray, let us not forget it is still God's good world, created and redeemed by him. And it is in this world that we are called to prepare the way- that the Holy Spirit might touch people's hearts now and establish God's rule there and further the coming of his final glorious Kingdom of justice and peace and joy.