

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A R Cole
The Third Sunday of Advent
Sunday, December 15, 2019

Isaiah 35:1-10
James 5:7-10
Matthew 11:2-11
Psalm 146:4-9

Sermon Advent 3 2019

Christmas is often said to be a child's time of year. The presents and the excitement that is inspired in young hearts and minds is a big part of celebration. Yet, it is more than that. In the baby in the manger, in the children's faces at the Pageant, in their eyes before the creche and under the Christmas tree, we adults are given the greater gift since, through them, we are permitted to see the world and God, once more, through a child's eyes.

As I grew up my father would sometimes read to me from a book of poetry called "A Child's Garden of Verse" by Robert Louis Stevenson (who wrote the famous novel "Treasure Island") "The Child's Garden of Verse" is all written as if through the eyes of a child. There was one poem I remember, that used to make my father weep as he read it. It is called "The Lamp Lighter" and it describes a very young boy looking out of a window and watching the lamp lighter moving up the street, lighting the gas lamps that used to light the streets of all our towns and cities in days gone by.

The Lamp Lighter Robert Louis Stevenson

My tea is nearly ready and the sun has left the sky;
It's time to take the window to see Leerie going by;
For every night at teatime and before you take your seat,
With lantern and with ladder he comes posting up the street.

Now Tom would be a driver and Maria go to sea,
And my papa's a banker and as rich as he can be;
But I, when I am stronger and can choose what I'm to do,
Oh Leerie, I'll go round at night and light the lamps with you!

[Many of you will know the story of how the race called the marathon, run in the Olympic Games, and in so many places now-a-days, got it's name. It comes from the events following the great battle fought between the Persians and the Athenians in 490 BC at the place by the same name. Despite being heavily outnumbered, the Athenians won the battle, but several Persian ships escaped and sailed for the undefended city of Athens to attack it. The story goes that a messenger, whose name was Pheidippides, was dispatched ahead of the Army to carry the good news of victory, but it was probably also to warn the city of the great danger. He is meant to have run the 26 or so miles, delivered his message, and then dropped dead from exhaustion. As he ran, he carried the fate of his people on his shoulders. If he didn't get there in time, victory could have become disaster. As he ran, and ran his life away, his life became that message. He allowed it to consume him utterly. The message got through, and that is what we commemorate each time a marathon is run.

Messengers are important people, but only because of the message they carry, who it is from and who it is going to. They are go-betweens, responsible for the passage of the message but not for the message itself.]

Today's Gospel is all about messengers. First, there are the two messengers that John sends to Jesus to ask him the pointed question, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to expect another?" The message is an expression of John's doubts. He had seen that Jesus was the Messiah but, languishing in prison, and hearing nothing of the great social and political uprising that he expected from the Messiah, he begins to wonder.

The other messenger in the Gospel today is, of course, John himself. Jesus says that John is the one the prophet Malachi foretells, "Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me."

In saying this, the people listening to Jesus would have understood that Jesus is saying that John is not only a prophet, but the last prophet. The one who proclaims the coming of the Messiah, the Holy one, the Lord's Anointed.

John preached a message of righteous anger and the impending wrath of God against the religious and secular powers that be. "The brood of vipers" and the corrupt Herod we heard about last week. He saw in Jesus the coming of God's Messiah, but Jesus didn't behave like the Messiah John was expecting. John expected a Messiah that would tear down the corrupt structures and burn through the world like a purifying fire.

Frank Wade, in his book "Biblical Fracking", describes John's anger as being like a bulldozer. Jesus, to John's incomprehension, seems more concerned with building something new, drawing people together, and healing rather than revolution and the destruction of those who deserved it. So they ask, "Are you the one?"

As is so often the case when people ask Jesus the wrong question, Jesus does not answer them. Instead he points to signs of new life, and healing that are happening and he sends an equally pointed message back to John, "and happy is the man who does not find in me a stumbling block."

John is right and he is wrong. He is right that Jesus is the Messiah, but he is wrong about what the Messiah has come to do. As Frank Wade points out, John's anger, all righteous anger, is necessary and right in the face of injustice. We need bulldozers to clear the ground, but you can't build anything with bulldozers. Anger never made anything new or good. For that, you need forgiveness, kindness, and all the subtle and gentle arts of the architect and builder of human hearts and lives. Poor John, he has done his job, even if he does not fully understand the message he carries, he has poured out his life in the carrying of it. Now, in a few days, a soldier will come into his cell in the evening and cut off his head to take to Herod's table. Like Pheidippides, [the runner who died exhausted after running with his message the 26.2 miles from the battle of Marathon to Athens] John dies for the message he carried.

I think we are sometimes the messengers from John. Full of righteous anger and thirst for the change that seems so necessary to us and so obviously what God must want. We come to Jesus and say, "Come on! Aren't you going to sweep our enemies away? Aren't you going to depose the wicked from their positions of power? Are you

the one we seek or must we look for another? And human beings have time and again, answered that question by turning to leaders, be it on the right or the left, who are as angry as they are, and who are willing to tear down what they want torn down, and all with no care at all for what God might want to build.

As we prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ, at Christmas, and at his coming at the end of our lives, the message of John is the angry bulldozer that makes us look at our lives and our religion and ask ourselves what is there that is unjust, or complacent, or just plain wrong there? The way of the Lord, our way forward in life sometimes needs a bulldozer to clear the obstacles and false structures we allow to grow up around us.

Once the way is made, though, Jesus, is the lamp lighter who comes posting up the street, lighting the lamps of hope, forgiveness, healing and new life in us. The light from those lamps is the true spiritual gifts that the writer of the Letter to the Galatians says are,

“love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control”.

These are the materials that can light our way and build new life in us and our world. As we approach Christmas once again, we do well to look at the children, our own, and other peoples, and try to see what they see. For it just may be, that we will be able to see through the madness and bitterness and brokenness of our adult world, and recognize the lamp lighter. The true Messiah going about his work, healing, building, forgiving and driving back the darkness for all who are willing to walk on the road he lights and that John and all the prophets before him, have bulldozed clear. Then we may be the child in the window seeing beneath the surface of the adult world.

For we are very lucky, with a lamp before the door,
And Leerie stops to light it as he lights so many more;
And O! before you hurry by with ladder and with light,
O Leerie, see a little child and nod to him tonight!

