

The third Sunday of Advent is traditionally called Rejoice Sunday. The week we hear from Paul in his letter to the Philippians.

"Rejoice in the Lord always.
again I will say rejoice."

"Sing aloud!" the prophet Zephaniah instructs us.

"Rejoice and exult with all your heart!"

"Shout aloud and sing for joy," says the prophet Isaiah.

"Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously."

While in our Gospel we again meet John the cantankerous Baptist, the bearded killjoy of Christmas.

"You brood of vipers!"

He shouts across the wilderness in the Gospel of Luke.

"Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

The fact that these harsh, austere words belong to Advent is both remarkable and refreshing. Hard words for hard lives. "You brood of vipers!"

Repent. Bear fruit. Wake up. He shouts for all to hear.

We hear great crowds stream into the desert to get yelled at by John. Why? Perhaps why has something to do with the question they ask John at the conclusion of his sermon.

"What should we do?"

This is not necessarily a question people ask when things are going well. This is a question asked when we are no longer so sure about ourselves, our lives, our God. Is this a question we are asking, this Advent season?

"And we, what should we do?"

Are we, like the crowds in John's story, moving toward repentance?
Or are we offended that repentance has a place in the Christmas story?

This morning we are given an Advent question. We are also given the answer John has for us. Imagine him if you will - a wild beast of a man, ascetic and rough. Yelling in the wilderness. I wonder what the crowds expect such a fringe character will say in answer to their question? Abandon your homes and families? Dwell in the wilderness? Start a revolution?

The answer he gives them is even more radical - so radical we stand in danger of missing it: *You should go home.*

Go home to your families, your neighbours, your vocations, your friends. Stop fleeing. Stop insisting that God is far away from the nitty-gritty dailiness of your life. Your one precious life. As Mary Oliver refers to a life.

Instead of waiting for a holy someday inhabit the stuff of your one precious life as deeply and as generously as you can right now. Share now. Be merciful now. Do justice now. Inhabit your life, no matter how plain, how obscure, how unglamorous, how routine. Why?

Because the ground beneath your feet, the ground of your life ... is holy ground.

What John is daring to suggest to his listeners is that holiness is not the mysterious thing we tend to make it. If we're willing to look closely, if we're willing to believe that nothing in our lives is too mundane or secular for God, then we'll understand that all the possibilities for salvation we need are embedded in the lives God has already given us. The kingdom of heaven is here, within and among us. The kingdom of heaven is home. Your life is infinitely dear. Precious.

This morning a Sunday, which has been referred to as Joy Sunday – the celebration of the gift that comes and the gift we are to and with one another. Of all people in scripture, it is John the Baptist wanting us to know the joy of coming home.

John the Baptist he knew this joy. And wants us to know this joy.

He was still a foetus when he first leapt for joy in his mother's womb when pregnant Mary visited her cousin Elisabeth. He was the first person to recognise Jesus

He rejoiced at the sound of his "bridegroom's" voice. When it was time for him to "decrease" so that Jesus could "increase," he did so willingly, saying, "My joy is now full."

What should we do? Go home says John the Baptist.

Where is home for you? That place you know the joy of coming home.

Home is more than your address. Home, that place where you belong. With people present, or on your own. Within walls of a house, or a cathedral, surrounded by nature. That space within each and every one of us, Jesus wants to be born and to settle in. Making home.

That is where John the Baptist wants us to return to.

In all your caring for others – from ensuring those with no home find some joy this Christmas to preparing your home – prepare for the joy John the Baptist wants for you. As odd and crusty as John is, he understands something hard about joy.

Joy is not sentiment. Joy is not happiness. Joy is not cheap.

He also knows the one for whom we wait will wrap each and every one of us in joy.

What should we do this Christmas? We should go home.

Returning to that space within us where we have room.

Wendy