

St Peter's, Mount Park Road, Ealing

Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> December 2014

Advent 3

Sermon: Make straight the way of the Lord.

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I have often wondered if John the Baptist really did live on locusts and wild honey. I doubt it really. It would have been a pretty poor diet, though I guess all that good glucose and pollen in the honey and the locust would have given him protein and roughage (all those crunchy carapaces). But where was his carbohydrate, his greens surely his mum told him to eat his greens. No I am convinced there was more to his diet than we are told. Besides if it were just him and a bunch of bugs imagine how long it would take him to collect enough for a proper dinner. He would have spent all day foraging in the wilderness, not as though honey and locusts grew on trees.

We know John had disciples and I am thinking there would have been a whole band of followers looking after him and caring for his needs; freeing John up to proclaim the coming of the Lord and to baptise the people of Israel. These itinerant preachers had a whole band of followers feeding them, raising funds for them, supporting them and encouraging them so they could get on preaching and teaching. You see John couldn't have done his job if he had been constantly worrying about money.

Jesus was the same. And we know he had a treasurer, the guy who kept the purse and paid the bills. The money came from donations and gifts made to the ministry of Jesus. Imagine if Jesus had to go out fund raising himself. He'd have stayed a carpenter I guess; or at least spent a lot of his time doing carpentry to make ends meet.

You see, a prophet can't be a prophet if they have to spend all their time worrying about money. The effectiveness of the prophetic work is dependent upon the financial support of the community.

We are called to be prophets. It is part of our baptism promise and the assertions we make at confirmation, that we will proclaim the good news of Jesus, that we will grow in faith and knowledge of God. Yet if we as a church community are constantly worrying about the churches finance how can we possibly be prophetic in our community? How can we proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ with love and enthusiasm?

At this moment in time we are worried about the churches finances. We have a stewardship team who are working on a stewardship programme in early 2015. At the moment they are looking at our present income and why we are falling short each month to the extent that we could be out of money by July next year.

It is not that we are not a generous parish either. Like most people, from time to time we just take our eye off the ball. We set up our standing orders or agree to part of the envelope scheme. We decide how much we can afford to give into the churches coffers recognising our desire to support the ministry of the church and then we let it run. We don't think about it again. Time passes, costs increase but it doesn't always occur to us that we might need to review our giving.

I have a story of an extreme example of this. Many years ago in a parish I was serving they had a stewardship campaign. There was a parishioner who had worked out what she could afford, she took it seriously and started paying in to the churches coffers. At the time she was 12 and she was giving 50p a week. For a 12 year old that was quite a sizeable amount. When we had a conversation she was in her late thirties and still paying 50p a week. She just hadn't thought about it, not until we had our stewardship campaign.

In Christian ministry we are called to be prophetic. It is no accident the Christian year begins with a focus on prophecy. Advent Sunday reflects on the wisdom of the Patriarchs on Abraham and Moses. The second Sunday in Advent looks to the words of the Old Testament prophets who are calling out for the coming of the salvation of Israel. Today we hear the prophetic call of John the Baptist to make straight the way of the Lord. On the fourth Sunday in Advent we look to Mary and the continuation of the work of salvation through her as the bearer of the Son of God.

The question I have for St Peter's today is how can we continue that prophetic ministry in our community if we are constantly worrying about money? How can we be a prophetic voice of God here in this place; bringing comfort, relief and protection, if we are worrying about our church finances.

As part of our Christmas preparations or maybe as a New Year resolution we could aim to assist the prophetic ministry of our church by reflecting upon and reviewing our giving, looking to increase what we offer to God's ministry. There will be a stewardship programme in February in which we will all be asked to pledge our giving in the most efficient and effective way we can. But now would be a good time to start for who knows the day of the coming of the Lord may be nearer than we think. We should start today marking straight the way of the Lord by giving generously to the work of God in our parish, prayerfully reflecting on our giving and looking to generously supporting the prophetic ministry of our church in the work of proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ.

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14 December 2014