**St John the Baptist, Eltham. Advent 3: 12th December 2021**

It is very good to be with you today as we continue to make our Advent preparations. I was very thankful to Bishop Michael Doe for stepping in at the last minute when I was unable to license Caroline in June and I am glad to say now what I couldn’t then - how delighted I am that Caroline is here in this parish and that I am confident that God will bless you with a rich partnership in the Gospel though her care and her prayerful leadership.

Your patron saint is in one of his customarily fierce moods in the Gospel reading this morning. “You brood of vipers! The axe is lying at the root of the trees!” John the Baptist certainly had no lack of energy when it came to exhortation but amid all the fire and brimstone, he issues a challenge that we ought to take seriously - particularly, I think, during Advent: “bear fruit”, he says, “worthy of repentance” (Luke 3.8).

The Baptist gives some practical examples of the fruit worthy of repentance - sharing with those who have nothing, being honest, and not using power for our own ends. At a time when the stock of integrity in our political leaders is low, those three imperatives: sharing with those who have nothing, being honest, and not using power for our own ends amount to a manifesto for re-discovering a moral compass. I doubt he would have had anything though to say about Christmas parties – I somehow cannot imagine John the Baptist at a party! St Paul gives us some habits of mind that we might describe as the soil in which these fruits might grow and it is this soil that I would like to explore today.

“Rejoice in the Lord always. And again I say: Rejoice” (Philippians 4.2) and two verses later perhaps even more tellingly given the uncertainties we still face in the pandemic: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” (Philippians 4.6)

Like much in the Christian faith, St Paul’s wisdom is counterintuitive because his starting-place is not our perspective on the world – as if we are always limited to looking out on the world as an observer. Instead he starts with God’s regard of us – from the perspective of eternity – so that we are freed to see ourselves as participants and actors. And this wisdom is eminently practical.

St Paul’s first piece of advice, if we are to bear good fruit - that is fruit that will last - is to rejoice. In fact it is not advice, rather it is an injunction: ‘Rejoice in the Lord always’. Not simply when we are happy. Not just when things are comfortable and we are content. Rather, we ought to rejoice always. This is a challenge for there are many good reasons not to rejoice. Many are suffering in body and mind and this has been compounded by the pandemic – young people being particularly vulnerable to stress and mental health issues. Many suffer uncertainty and we are perhaps living with greater uncertainty about the future than at any previous point in our lives. Many are enduring considerable hardship and if there is indeed another lockdown the impact on people’s livelihoods will be considerable. And yet – we are to rejoice.

The insight here is that rejoicing requires us to find something for which to be thankful, something - or someone - to rejoice in and or with. Those who rejoice develop habits of thanksgiving and attentiveness. They see the particular play of light at evening. They see a formation of clouds and recall the imagination of childhood. They can see the race of raindrops down a windowpane and feel the energy of each drop. They are not just hopeless romantics but because they look – because they see – they have noticed something to delight in, and in which they can rejoice.

How many times do we fail to rejoice because we simply fail to see? But when we attend to what we find around us, we begin to discover ourselves in a proper relationship to it. We are free to see ourselves as one part of something larger through which we – and the joyful thing we observe – have a proper and life-giving relationship. There will be many challenges for us in the immediate and near future. Do not forget to give yourself time and space to observe – time to see – time to ponder - on what is around you. Take up St Paul’s discipline of rejoicing! For if you look, you will find something beautiful that causes you to rejoice and to be thankful.

St Paul’s next instruction is to be gentle. There are times when our happiness can mean we are forgetful of those around us. It is eminently possible that our rejoicing might occur even at the expense of others, whether we mean that to happen or not. But one way to avoid this is always to be gentle, to cultivate the practice of small acts of kindness. We know instinctively to do this when we are with those we love, or with those who need help. But if we make gentleness a habit, we see that it is closely related to the disciplines of thanksgiving and attentiveness that keep us rejoicing. You see, it is necessary to be close to things to be truly attentive – to really see what is next to you. And this requires gentleness. We cannot see what is in front of us if we handle something or someone roughly, or dismissively. That is why St Paul follows the command to be gentle with “The Lord is near”. The God who sees us from eternity is also near, always gentle with us, always seeing us as we are – and as we might be - if we draw near to Him.

St Paul’s last injunction is not to be anxious. “Do not worry about anything”, he says, “but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (Philippians 4.6). In other words do not let what you do not know trouble you. This is because worry erodes what we can do – because worry wastes our resources, and makes us less able to act appropriately and resolutely. It inhibits our care for others, and for ourselves.

For St Paul, worry is better replaced with something else, something that allows us to act, to participate, to live in a healthy relationship with what is around and ahead of us. And that is thanksgiving. We are therefore being encouraged by St Paul to replace worry with gratitude and thanksgiving. So if you feel anxious, give yourself the time to look around you. Find something near that you can attend to, gently – and give thanks for it. Rejoice in it and – little by little – you will bear fruit worthy of repentance and, in so doing, learn with how much gentleness and delight God rejoices to be near you.

My friends, we are living in an anxious world, anxiety is the default condition of modern society; yet time and time again the Bible speaks to us loudly and clearly of the graciousness of God and we are encouraged to be not anxious, not to fear, and not to be afraid. Mary overcame her fear in her encounter with God’s messenger, the Angel Gabriel, who came to explain the part she was to play in the divine plan for our salvation. In laying fear and anxiety aside God’s loving purposes unfolded in her response: ‘be it unto me according to thy Word’ and were fulfilled in the Word made flesh, coming to dwell among us, full of grace and truth.

As we journey through Advent and our focus increasingly is on the coming of Christ in his nativity, so may we be gentle and kind and attentive, setting fear and anxiety aside as we rejoice in the Lord always and open our hearts to the love of God for each of us. Amen.