

The Third Sunday of Advent
Bruton Parish Church
The Rev. John Maxwell Kerr
Sunday, December 11, 2011

In all three Scripture readings today, not one word is spoken by Jesus. You should be neither disappointed nor surprised by this.

That is because this is the Third Sunday in Advent, and we are waiting (in joyful anticipation) for the coming of Christ. In Advent, we wait for the coming of the Lord into our midst. No wonder he's not saying much: he hasn't been born yet.

True enough: in Advent we Christians are indeed looking forward to the birth of Jesus Christ our Lord, the Messiah, but there is another, too much neglected yet extremely important, aspect of Advent and today's Lessons remind us and bring us to our Christian senses.

Advent is the Church's Season of Judaism. Judaism is our heritage: it is the culture and the context which gave us this Season of Joyful Anticipation. The Jewish Faith gave us the prophets, in today's lessons, Isaiah and John the Baptist, and St Paul too wrote always as a Jewish convert. Christianity was born from Judaism, as was Christ himself.

If we forget that our Jewish heritage gave us the specific hope of the Messiah, we easily slide into an obsession with the baby and, of course, gift-giving, Black Friday and Cyber Monday all follow from that. There is a baby: no can deny there was a baby. Expectations and hopes about the coming Messiah were surprisingly fulfilled in the babe in the manger in Bethlehem. Those hopes and expectations were those we inherit from Judaism: they are the ones in the first lesson from Isaiah. And, lest we forget, Jesus of Nazareth, the Babe lying in the Manger was born a Jew, of Jewish parents and brought up as an observant, if radical, Jew.

Advent: a time to look forward to the birth of Christ, and a time to remain connected to Judaism. Advent: the Church's Season of Judaism. An essential season in the Church's year.

What if we do only focus exclusively on the Baby lying sweetly in the Manger? Then we fall into that trap into which modern Christians fall in shrieking droves. The trap is goey sentimentality and maudlin self-indulgence. You might well tell me, "What's wrong with that? I've been celebrating Christmas, the Baby Jesus, just like that all these years." Yes. Quite. But we aren't at Christmas yet: this is Advent and it's Advent on purpose.

Somehow, Advent has slipped through the Church's liturgical fingers until it has become merely a way of making a head-start on Christmas. We, here, haven't quite fallen headlong into that trap: we still keep Advent, sing Advent hymns and don't leap to singing Christmas carols, not yet, not yet! That's the joyful anticipation bit. It is not Christmas yet. Fortunately, our readings today from Holy Scripture correct us, in a nice way of course, and remind us why we Christians keep Advent.

What's wrong with just dropping Advent altogether and going straight to Christmas as Walmart does? One minor reason, obviously, is that we'd never get to use the beautiful blue Altar Frontals and Vestments, blue, the colour of reflection and thoughtfulness, as well as of the Virgin Mary.

You *do* know that if you'd asked our great Christian forebears of those heroic foundational first centuries after Christ, "What are you doing for Christmas?" they'd look at you amazed. They'd be appalled at how we celebrate Christmas, amazed to hear we think the Christmas Gospels are all about the Baby. "Haven't you read the Gospel of St Mark? Today's Gospel reading is from St John: NO BABY. LOOK! NO BABY! NO MANGER! NO SHEPHERDS, NOT A ONE! AND NOT A SINGLE MAGI: NO MAGI (no early Christians thought there were any Kings)."

The focus wasn't on that dear sweet ickle-pretty baby: it was on the Messiah, the Christ of God and the joyful hope and expectation found in him. The response wasn't, "Isn't he cute?" It was Allelujah! Christ the Messiah is the promised one, promised by God through the prophets: the Saviour, is born.

In the long period before there even was a New Testament as we know it, Christians would have quoted from our lesson from Isaiah: the Messiah, the Christ, the anointed one of God, was sent by God "to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners." More like the Arab Spring than 'O come let us adore him.' The surprising thing about the baby is that he is the Messiah of God and if you wanted to know what that meant, you'd read and re-read and re-read the verses from Isaiah 61. That explains the joyful anticipation: that is what was sown in the garden of God waiting to spring up in the bleak midwinter.

And with that in mind, let us look at the Holy Gospel according to John. What is it John says to skeptics about the Messiah's coming? Not, just you wait 'til Christmas you Jews and priests and Levites from Jerusalem! There's a surprise waiting for you, gift-wrapped in swaddling clothes.

He said, and I hope you were paying attention, "Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me." He means the Messiah is among you.

Luke's story has no room at the inn, shepherds, angels, silent night.
Matthew's has wise men, a star, King Herod.

There is a reason we keep Advent and there is a reason we have FOUR Gospels, including John's in which John the Baptist produces his Christmas surprise for us. No Babe in a manger: the Messiah is among us.

Hasidic Jews tell a traditional story which will help us, because we need help this Advent to make sense of John's Gospel.

"Once upon a time, there was a monastery which had fallen upon hard times. The Great Age of Faith had been swept away by war, secularization, materialism and self-indulgence. Now there was only the Abbot, a very old man indeed, and four other brothers, and they were all over seventy. Clearly the Order of Monks was dying.

In the forest near the monastery there was a little hut. The rabbi from the local town used to come there to spend time alone in silent prayer. Through their many years of prayer and contemplation in community, the monks had become attuned to holiness. They just knew when the old rabbi was in his hut praying. One day, the abbot of the monastery was particularly feeling hopeless about the future. It occurred to him that he might as well go and just see if the rabbi had any good advice that might save the monastery, so off he went into the woods.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot into his little hut but when the abbot explained why he was there, the rabbi started to cry. "I know how it is. The spirit has gone out of our people too: nobody comes to synagogue any more." So the two old men wept, and read the Scriptures and prayed together. The abbot got up to go. "I am so glad we have finally met. But, you know, isn't there anything you could tell me, no advice or plan for the monastery's future?"

"No, I am so sorry," said the rabbi, I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is among you."

When the abbot got back, the other monks crowded 'round. "What did he say? Did he have anything to help us?" "No, except he did say one very strange thing just as I was leaving. He said the Messiah is one of us."

The monks went on with their orderly quiet lives but they began to wonder. "One of US? The Messiah here among us in the monastery? Which one can he be?"

He must have meant Father Abbot: he is so wise and good. On the other hand, maybe he meant Brother Thomas: he is a very holy man, full of the light of God. Or Brother Aelred. He does get crotchety at times, but isn't he almost always right? Often very right, and he helps us to see truths we are too blinkered to notice. Surely not Brother Phillip: he's too passive, a real

nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, the minute you need him he's there by your side. Maybe it IS Phillip. Maybe. But it can't be me, an ordinary person. I have no spectacular Messiah-like qualities! Yet, what if it were me?

As they each began to think about the Messiah being one of them, being among them, they began to treat each other with extraordinary respect.

People from the town used to come to the monastery in the woods for picnics and to look at the quaint architecture. Somehow, with no real reason why, they sort of picked up that aura of love among the brothers, their humble respect. There was an air of, well, *holiness*, even though the tourists couldn't tell you what they meant by that. And they found themselves coming back more and more often and bringing their friends to the monastery.

Some of the young students from the town started to talk to the old monks; they liked being with them. And first one, then others, somewhat shyly, asked if they might join the monastery as novices.

And so within a few years, the monastery had once again become a thriving community full of the light and love of God.

"Among you stands one whom you do not know." That one is the Messiah, the Christ of God, and that is the Christmas story of the Gospel of John, as spoken by John the Baptist, the Great Jewish Prophet. And it is a story for us to think and pray about this Advent tide.