

Scripture: Isaiah 11: 1-10 / Matthew 3: 1-12

Although the person of the Moderator changes from year to year, each Moderator tends to follow a standard programme of visits and events - and what is referred to as the 'London week' is always regarded as one of the highlights of the Moderator's year.

Signing the Columba Agreement with the Archbishop of Canterbury, a visit to 10 Downing Street and a meeting with the Prime Minister, conversations about homelessness, an issue dear to my own heart, with people at St Martin's in the Field and Borderline: our week has been packed with so many interesting things to do and people to meet, not least the opportunity for Margaret and I to join you in worship this evening.

And so in sharing this service, it is my privilege as Moderator to bring you the greetings, prayers and good wishes of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.

Text: *He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth* (Isaiah 11: 3,4)

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT, AMEN

With Matthew's description of him wearing clothes made of camel's hair, a leather belt around his waist, living in the bleak austerity of the Judean desert wilderness, and surviving on a diet of locusts and wild honey, there is something reminiscent of an Old Testament prophet about Matthew's description of John the Baptist.

Eccentric, different, an outsider; does Matthew want us to make that prophetic connection?

Given the Biblical scholars consider Matthew's gospel to have been written for a largely Jewish audience, it may well be reasonable to assume Matthew's description of John would remind his readers of Elijah described in 2 Kings as *a man with a garment of hair and a leather belt around his waist*.¹

I wonder, however, if the prophetic links and connections are about much more than clothes, lifestyle and diet?

Although Jesus would later sing his praises declaring none greater than John had ever been born, John the Baptist was comes across as one of the 'awkward squad'.

John declared the kingdom of God was near.....although not in the courtyards of the Temple but in the open spaces of the desert.

Such a claim would resonate with Matthew's readership.

¹ 2 Kings 1: 8

From the experience of the Exodus and their long journey to the Promised Land, the people of Israel knew the wilderness to be a place of danger and deprivation.

They also knew it to be a place of divine presence and promise.

Does this explain why so many people were drawn to John?

Did they find in this strange, desert eccentric someone who appeared much closer to God than their own priests, someone who saw things differently, who saw God differently, and who offered a different way of living and a different type of faithfulness?

Seeing things differently, offering a different way of living and a different type of faithfulness: is this the connection Matthew intends us to make between John and the prophetic tradition of ancient Israel?

***He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,
or decide by what he hears with his ears;***

In one of the most famous passages in the Bible, Isaiah offers a glorious vision of God's world as God intends it to be.

It is a vision of complete harmony.....and at its heart stands the figure of a king.

Isaiah's king is presented as the defender of the most vulnerable people in the land.

Rather than judging by appearances, the king will judge with righteousness, that is, there will not be one law for the rich and another for the poor because the king will ensure all are treated fairly.

And since true peace can only be founded upon justice, Isaiah's vision spills over into nature because just as powerful and predatory human beings will not oppress or exploit others, neither will the lamb or the kid be prey to the wolf or the leopard.

These verses inspired the 19th century American artist, Edward Hicks.

In a painting entitled *The Peaceable Kingdom*, Hicks depicts a friendly ox and a large lion eating straw while children play happily beside a leopard and a bear.

The deep, rich earthy greens and browns of the painting suggest a fertile landscape and there is an unmistakable air of peace and calm about the scene.

Yet mindful of the human propensity for violence, our seemingly insatiable desire for power and control, at one corner of *The Peaceable Kingdom* a group of Native Americans and settlers are signing a peace treaty.

Having lost their land the indigenous people are paying a large price for peace, something in sharp contrast to the rest of Hick's painting and the harmony of Isaiah's vision.

Aftab Gohar is one of my colleagues and minister at Abbotsgrange church in Grangemouth.

Born and brought up in Peshawar, north-west Pakistan, early one Sunday morning he heard the BBC news reports of a bomb exploding at All Saints Church.

This was the church where his parents had been married, Aftab had been baptised and married, and his children had been baptised.

Aftab knew many of his family would be attending the morning service.

Aftab told of his frantic mobile 'phone calls to some of his relatives and of finally being able to speak to his mother as she died, the poor woman in dreadful pain.....and then with it being the youth service at his church, and because he didn't want to let the children down, Aftab went to his church and took the morning service.

In the event, as well as his mother, Aftab lost several other family members and friends including his nephew and niece.

Aftab showed us photographs of the scene, and he described his hurt and his family's profound sense of loss

And yet he did so without bitterness, anger or recrimination and fully aware that the threat remains of further attacks on the church and Christian community in Pakistan.

You could have heard a pin drop as Aftab spoke.

Despite the terrible thing that had happened to him, his family and friends, people whom he loved dearly, here was a man who refused to judge by what he had heard and seen, and who continued to seek the righteousness of God and justice for the poor of the earth.

If Isaiah's vision points to the way a nation and its people are judged by how it treats, cares and protects the most vulnerable people within it, you don't need to look to Pakistan for damning evidence, you need look no further than our own country.

One of the best things the Church of Scotland has done in recent years was to establish the Poverty Truth Commission bringing together people who have experience of poverty with politicians, civil servants, church and civil leaders.

The group aimed to bring to light the truth about poverty in Scotland today and to find ways of overcoming it.

Starting from the position that it is not possible to address the root causes of poverty without the involvement of people who experience it, the Commission took as its slogan; *Nothing about us, without us, is for us.*

Its reports, findings and conclusions make for sobering reading shedding light on the difficulties and choices faced by many of our fellow citizens, a harsh reality many of the homeless charities like Fresh Start respond to every day.

Disparity in life expectancy and educational attainment, a proliferation of food banks across the country, and, for the first time during this year's school summer holidays, congregations providing lunches for children who would otherwise have gone hungry; all the evidence points to a growing division in Scotland between rich and poor.

If such divisions and disparities are difficult, challenging and controversial for the church to address, John the Baptist provides our inspiration.

From his desert wilderness John confronted the political establishment and religious elite of his day with his call to a new way of seeing, a new way of listening and a radically different way of living.

And people flocked to him in their droves from Jerusalem, Judea and the whole region of the Jordan.

Standing in Israel's ancient prophetic tradition, John called people to see the world through God's eyes..... and where better are we able to do so than through the life and teaching, values and priorities, service and sacrifice of the child born in Bethlehem, Mary's child, the Son of God.

Jesus did not judge by what he saw with his eyes.

He did not decide by what he heard with his ears.

Rather our Lord judged the needy with righteousness, and with justice he gave decisions for the poor of the earth – and for those of us who later this month would celebrate his birth, he expects us to do the same.

Now unto him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think according to the power that worketh in us, unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end, Amen