

Scripture: Isaiah 11: 1-9 / 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 morning.

And 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: *This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah. "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight paths for him.* (Matthew 3: 3)

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

Think of each gospel as a musical score: that is the suggestion of Larry Hurtado, Professor Emeritus of New Testament at Edinburgh's New College.

Hurtado likes to think of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John as musical renditions of the Jesus story, each one set in a different key but with all four having common phrases and recognisable tunes.

The gospel as a musical score; I like that idea.

I like it because rather than worrying about points of agreement or difference in the Biblical text, the fact neither Mark nor John mention anything of Jesus' birth whereas Matthew and Luke describe it quite differently, imagining the gospel as musical score allows for a degree of artistic freedom.

As each evangelist explores the life and teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, they do so with their own distinctive melodies.

So beginning as it does with a genealogy running from Abraham through King David to Jesus, the Biblical scholars agree that one of the distinctive features of Matthew's gospel is the attention given to Jesus' ministry as the fulfilment of Hebrew prophecy.

Time and again Matthew takes care to note that something happened or was said *in order that what had been spoken of through the prophet* came true.

So perhaps you noticed when he introduced us to John the Baptist preaching in the Judean desert, Matthew was careful to add;

*This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah.*

Some years ago I stood in the Judean desert at the place now identified as the site of John's ministry.

If the Judean desert is everything you have ever imagined, a bleak, inhospitable and blisteringly hot limestone wilderness several hundred feet below sea level, let me tell you that far from being a clear flowing river, at that point the river Jordan is little more than a dirty brown stream.

Yet there is now considerable historical, archaeological and geological evidence to support the claim that it was in this particular area, some five miles north east of the Dead Sea, where John ministered and Jesus came to be baptised.

Of course, while it is impossible to be certain about the actual location, John's ministry provides Matthew with a framework for Jesus' ministry and mission.

We know that shunning all material comforts and possessions, John lived and dressed simply.

He makes a point of eating only what God provided from the land.

Furthermore, conducted far from Jerusalem, the centre of traditional religious activity, John's ministry constituted an alternative to the Jerusalem establishment with its Temple rituals and sacrifices.

It was a ministry which brought John into conflict with the Pharisees and Sadducees and would ultimately lead to his untimely and gruesome death, beheaded by Herod Antipas at the request of his sister in law, Herodias.

In other words, like the overture to an opera when we as an audience are introduced to many of the musical themes to follow, so Matthew's description of what happened to John sets the scene for much of what will happen to Jesus.

Paradoxically however, although Jesus would later sing John's praises declaring that none greater had ever been born, John's location in the Judean desert marks him out as an outsider.

Why?

John declares that God is near – but he doesn't do so in the Temple, the place of ritual and sacrifice and the traditional seat of authority and power; rather John does so in the desert.

Such a claim would resonate with Matthew's Jewish audience.

It would awaken for them the story of the exodus, Israel's escape from Egypt and the 40 years spent in the desert.

They would recognise the desert to be a place of danger and deprivation.

Yet from the story of the exodus, they would also know the desert to be a place of revelation and hope, a place where God's presence, promise and purpose was more clearly discerned.

Perhaps this helps explain that despite the austere and uncompromising nature of his lifestyle and message, so many people from Jerusalem and the surrounding area were drawn to John.

Perhaps people found this strange and eccentric man lived with an integrity and truthfulness they did not find elsewhere.

Perhaps people intuitively sensed that in the wilderness it was possible to see things more clearly and turn in a new direction?

Because whatever else John's lifestyle and preaching called for, it called for a turning and a new direction.

*Repent, he declared, for the kingdom of heaven is near.*

According to Chambers dictionary repent means to regret, to be sorry for something or wish something to have been otherwise.

As it is used in the Bible, however, repent has a deeper, richer meaning.

Yes, it means sorrow and remorse but it also calls for a change of heart, a change of mind, a purposeful and deliberate turning towards a new way of living.

This commentator captures it well when he wrote;

*Repentance, as the Bible conceives it, has more to do with our attitude to the future than to the past, more to do with a change of heart, than a wallowing in self-pity<sup>1</sup>*

In other words, although John's preaching condemned the Pharisees and Sadducees as a brood of vipers, although it left people in no doubt Israel must turn from her exploitation of people who were poor and vulnerable, John was quite clear feeling sorrow and regret was not enough.

In calling for repentance John wanted people to commit themselves to the new possibilities, fresh horizons and new way of living Jesus would bring.

Here is the heart of John's message; his profound conviction that with the presence of Christ in the world, the kingdom of heaven is near.

Are you convinced?

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<sup>1</sup> James Simpson Keywords of Faith, Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh. 1992, p62

Given the on-going conflict in Syria and South Sudan, given all the appalling acts of terrorism in Belgium, France, Germany, do you need persuaded that the world is not as it should be, could be, ought to be?

Given the overwhelming scientific evidence about climate change, do you think we have grasped the urgency of the situation?

Whatever Brexit will mean, we live in one of the richest countries of the world, rich in terms of its people, its culture, its skills, resources and opportunities, yet the number of people registered as homeless in Scotland is the same as it was 20 years ago, food banks are flourishing the length and breadth of the country, while for the first time in living memory during the school summer holidays in Scotland, many congregations provided lunches for children who would otherwise have gone hungry.

Is that the best we can do?

Is that the best our country can aspire to be?

When I stood on the Jordanian side of the river I watched two young Jordanian soldiers smoking their cigarettes and watching television.

A few metres away on the other side of the stream two young Israeli soldiers smoked their cigarettes and watched television.

Jew, Christian or Muslim, people of every faith community and none, can we aspire to nothing better, nothing more creative, nothing more constructive, healing and humane?

On the second Sunday of Advent a single note echoes down the centuries.

Listen for it.

It is the voice of one calling in the desert, calling for a change of ways, calling for a change of heart, pointing to a new and better way of living, and telling us that the kingdom of heaven is near.

**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**