

SERMON PREACHED BY THE RECTOR
THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT 2011

There was a man sent from God whose name was John.

The sermon that was preached when I first presided at a celebration of the Eucharist started off with those slightly daunting words and the preacher pointed at me. I am not quite sure whether it was designed to put the congregation in their place. Your curate is a man sent from God, so you better pay attention, -so present congregation please take note. Or whether it was to put me, if not in my place, at least alert me to the awesome responsibilities which I was taking up. So maybe preacher please take note. Or maybe both you and me take note.

I suppose it could be said that I was sent from God because like all clergy I claimed to have had a vocation, literally a call from God, vocation from the Latin *vocare*, to call. And my belief that I had a call from God was accepted by the church. But if God calls he also sends. God never calls people just for the fun of it. He calls us because he has tasks for us to do. God called John the Baptist because he had a task for him to perform, to be the forerunner of the Messiah, the one who goes before to prepare the way. He was called by God and so he was a man sent from God. Mind you just because you have a call doesn't mean you have a hotline to the Holy Ghost. It is worth noting at this point that we can be a bit free in calling on the Holy Spirit to justify our actions. There is a well known story of a young man on his preordination retreat who got rather bored and slipped out one afternoon for some fun. Unfortunately he met the Bishop in the High Street who asked what he was doing.

The Holy Spirit told me to go shopping, he said

The Bishop replied *How odd that you should both be wrong. It's early closing day.*

Always be a little wary of people who claim to be on constant and intimate terms with the Holy Spirit. However I am conscious of a call.

I have rehearsed many times over the last forty years how I woke up one morning with a terrible sinking feeling in my stomach and knowing just knowing that the only way to deal with it was by offering myself to the church. I really hoped that they would say No and let me off the hook. But the blighters didn't and here I am. But my other experiences of of God and his calling are much more diffuse, much more elusive, much more ambiguous. There are certainly many people who as it were prepared the way. I look to the people who have influenced me, partly because I admired something in them, *I like what you have got. I would like something like it myself.* I look to the people who introduced me to the church, to Christianity, to faith;

My mother, a great 8 o'clocker, whose simple spirituality and weekly consistency made a profound effect on me. Or Mrs Myers who used to take me to Sunday School, where she taught. Mrs Myers had been an atomic scientist, but had given it all up when she married (how times change) and devoted her life to the church, slightly I think to the puzzlement of her husband who was also a scientist, but as he cheerfully admitted not such a good one. But maybe they were preparing the ground

How each one of us ended up as members of the church, the Body of Christ, the ways are many and various. For some it is dramatic, a real sense of the Risen Lord changing your life. For others it is a gentler process of hints and nudges. But whatever the journey, we are all called. And called for a purpose. D.H.Lawrence once said that an artist isn't a special kind of human being. Rather each human being is a special kind of artist. The purpose of a fulfilled life is to discover what kind of an artist we have been called to be. And if we are called, we are also sent. As I say God does not call us for the fun of it. He calls us because he has tasks for us to do. To be his presence in the world, his ambassadors in the world, calling on the world to acknowledge the power of love, The love of God and the love of neighbour, from which all good behaviour flows.

A few Christmases ago I quoted some words from George Elliot's novel Daniel Deronda, in which the hero Deronda, tells Gwendoline Harleth, the rather spoilt and shallow heroine,

You should so live your life that others are glad they were born. And I then had to admit in a sermon in August that it looked as though I had made it up because I couldn't find it in an online version of the book. But actually I am not clever enough to have made up such a thrilling quote and I am delighted to say that it is indeed in the novel and I can give you Chapter and verse.

You should so live your life that others are glad they were born. Not a bad summary of the tasks to which we as Christians have been called. To which we are called and for which we are sent. There was a man sent from God whose name was John, But never forget there are also men and women sent by God, whose names are to be found not just in Crockford's clerical directory but in the Electoral rolls of churches up and down the land, not least here in Compton. Called and sent



SERMON PREACHED BY THE RECTOR

2ND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Some of you may have seen the film version of John Le Carre's book *The Constant Gardener*. In the film there is a scene in which the hero, played by Ralph Fiennes escapes from a medical camp which is being attacked by bandits. The aid workers run to a waiting plane but Fiennes is carrying a young African child.

No room says the pilot. *Aid workers only*. Fiennes argues with the pilot but while this is going on the child with a look of resignation on its face slips out of the plane and runs away- to a very uncertain future,

You could see this as an example of the horrors of Africa or of white indifference to black suffering, but I want to see it in biblical terms. How children are not important. Hang on a minute you say, that's not biblical, quite the reverse Children are very important in the bible. On our Patronal Festival, St Nicholas we always hear the famous passage about Jesus saying Let the children come to me and taking them I his arms he blessed them. What we probably do not realise is how revolutionary his attitude was. Now we live in a culture in which children are important. I know the news is full of stories about children who have been treated as far from important, but as a society we are outraged by such behaviour. Most people's lives in western society revolve around children to some extent or other. Their lives at home, their progress at school, the presents they will be bought this Xmas. All this and much more are signs of the importance of children. But that is a relatively modern idea.

Social historians and anthropologists are now pointing out that it wasn't always so. And if you think about it that makes sense. After all it is only in the last say 150 years or so that infant mortality has ceased to be part of our lives. You simply cannot afford to hold children so close, so precious, so important, you cannot afford to bond with them, when infant mortality means that one half to two third three quarters or more of children born will die in infancy. The emotional burden would be too great. In poor and in our terms unsophisticated societies children are simply not regarded as important in the same way as our society. So in the film the child knew that it did not belong among white adults and so withdrew to the margins and fringes of life. So when Jesus took children in his arms when he said that they were important he was being provocative and revolutionary. Whatever else he was saying about the importance of being child like, he was deliberately going out to people on the margins of society, who were simply not important because of who and what they were. Children simply did not simply could not matter in the adult scheme of things as we have come to understand it.

And in extending his open arms to children, Jesus was behaving exactly as he did to the others on the margins of society]: the outcast the lepers, the poor the sick the hungry and the homeless. These were the people to whom Jesus gave a welcome and therefore a value they had never before experienced. These were the people to whom Jesus was indeed Good news. I have to say that it was only after reading an article about a history of children by a French historian Dr Philippe Anes that I have become aware of this aspect to a gospel passage which I thought I knew so well. I am glad to have had my understanding enlarged.

I should not be surprised that my views have been changed. The opening words of St Mark's gospel which we have just heard read are the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ the |son of God. The beginning of the good news that is in early English the god spiel, the gospel. Good news or as Isaiah has it Glad tidings. The gospel is good news: it is NEWS and for it to be news it must have the power: to surprise, or shock or intrigue or cajole and above all to change.

Same old news we say if we think the headlines are boring. If it's the same old then it can't be news. And if we find ourselves saying or thinking same old gospel same old good news then something has gone wrong or is missing. The same old good news cannot be good and it cannot be news. It may well be the preacher's fault for not making the good news relevant or accessible or interesting or good or news, it's a very good test of a sermon in what sense is it good? In what sense is it news? Or is the only response so what?

It may be the listeners fault: I know what I like and I like what I know and so I will not hear anything else. The gospel can't shock me. If the only thing you come to church for is familiarity- and that's it- it's difficult to see in what way the gospel can be good news.

But the problem can never be is the fault of the gospel, the good news itself. For it to be news, it must have the power to surprise, or shock or intrigue or cajole and above all to change.



SERMON PREACHED BY THE RECTOR
ADVENT SUNDAY 2011

It is a sobering thought that Christmas is only four weeks away, though whether sobering is quite the right word given what many of us will be doing in the next four weeks is I suppose debateable. The prospect of Christmas may well fill you with alarm it certainly does me. In fact I am not sure that once you have stopped believing in Father Christmas whether it ever feels the same. Certainly Adrian Mole aged 13¾ was wondering where the carefree Christmases of his childhood had gone. We are not meant to sympathise with Scrooge in Dickens A Christmas Carol but most of us have at some stage felt that Scrooge's refrain *bah humbug* sums up Christmas very well.

In the course of A Christmas Carol the miserly and miserable Scrooge is visited by three ghosts or spirits: Christmas Past, Christmas Present and Christmas Yet to Come. Christmas Past and Christmas present are of course accurate descriptions of Scrooge's experience. Christmas Yet to Come terrifies him because of its grim predictions. This must not happen says the appalled Scrooge. Very well then says the Ghost You must change. If you repent and change then the future may not be as grim as it now appears. Scrooge does indeed repent and change and the future becomes rosy and pleasant Tiny Tim does not die is able to utter his famous benison "God bless us, every one."

Pretty sickly and of course a work of fiction. But in fact the ghost of Christmas Yet to Come is acting just like an Old Testament prophet. We tend to think that prophecy is about foretelling the future in the manner of a fortune teller. But in fact most prophecy is about warning. Saying to Israel If you go on like this then the future will be disastrous. But if you repent, if you change, if you seek the kingdom of God and its righteousness, rather than your own selfish needs and your greed, your cruelty and your indifference, if you seek that which is good then the future is not pre-ordained. It could be different, better. But only you can change. The prophets did not seek to terrify and proclaim doom, though they often seem to be doing that. Rather they sought to warn and so to change.

And Jesus stood very much in a prophetic tradition and this morning's gospel can be seen in that context, Jesus is issuing a warning. A warning about understanding the times. So like any prophet he warns. Be alert. Be awake Keep watch. Keep watch for the signs of the kingdom. Because the master of the house may come at evening or at midnight or at cock crow or at dawn. Evening, midnight, cock crow and dawn. What does that sequence suggest? What does the gospel writer want us to refer to? The word cockcrow is interesting and unusual. Extremely unusual because it only occurs in one other place

in the whole of the bible, as part of the sequence of events between what we call Maundy Thursday and Good Friday: the evening of the Last Supper, the betrayal in the garden in the middle of the night, the cock crowing , and the trial at first light.

At that moment a cock crew and Peter remembered how Jesus had said that before the cock crows you will deny me three times; and Peter went outside and wept bitterly

St Peter the rock on which the church is built is brought up directly and starkly against his betrayal, his failure, his sin. He has to stare it in the face and can only do one thing: he wept bitterly. And in weeping bitterly he starts that journey back to self respect and the Risen Christ's command Tend and feed my sheep. The cock crow calls us to repentance and a new life rejecting the selfishness and greed, the emotional and even physical violence which mark so much of human life.

I started my sermon by referring to one of the giants of English literature Charles Dickens I want to end with another, even greater, giant, Shakespeare. Shakespeare's religious views have long been a matter for debate. The humanist Shakespeare: The first to gaze into the deep dark abyss we call death and not be afraid. Or the crypto Roman Catholic Shakespeare whose writings are full of hidden Catholic references.

Or perhaps someone who simply understood the gospel in a way that sets him apart from the self proclaimed religious of almost every age. His play Hamlet is about revenge and Hamlet's fatal indecisiveness as to whether he can indeed avenge his father's murder and yet remain a good man. Towards the start of the play the ghost of Hamlet's father appears during the night to call for vengeance on Claudius, his murderer. But his father's ghost disappears -- when?

Marcellus tells us, setting the scene: *It faded on the crowing of the cock.* Well need we read anything into that? Well yes , because Marcellus goes on to say:

Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes

Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,

This bird of dawning singeth all night long

And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad.... ... so hallowed and so gracious is the time

It faded on the crowing of the cock. The ghost demanding vengeance, that most instinctive and yet destructive of human responses, the ghost hears the cock crow, that symbolic moment in the gospel when human failure knows that it must give place to Divine forgiveness. The ghost hears the cock and disappears. And, says Marcellus, some say that at Christmas the cock crows all night long to banish the spirits, the symbols of evil, against the coming of the one who will proclaim and en-flesh the love and forgiveness of God. And so during Advent we prepare ourselves for the coming of the Christ child. We pray for that Christmas day to dawn when the Gospel of love and forgiveness will finally chase away all

the ghosts of vengeance and violence, of selfishness and greed. We pray for the day of God's peace revealed in Jesus Christ, when we too can say "so hallowed and so gracious is the time." Be alert. Keep awake.



SERMON PREACHED BY THE RECTOR
CHRIST THE KING 2011.

My sister Anne and I are very different people in all sorts of ways. Certainly when we younger one huge difference was in our dress sense. My mother once observed to me that if Anne wore a lot of purple, within a few months the shops would be full of purple. It was not that Anne was a trend setter, but that she was very good at spotting fashion trends in their early stages. She was as we say always ahead of the curve. I on the whole was not. At the moment I am reading the biography of a young priest who died of Aids; and his sister writing of him says: *He was a quiet, academic boy, who seemed to me to be an embarrassing fogey, with his old fashioned haircut and tweed jackets, and his friends pompous as only twelve year old boys could be.* I think my sister would recognise her own brother immediately.

And even today I am hardly in the forefront of fashion when it comes to clothes. I nearly won the fancy dress competition at Shackleford 60 years after VE day celebration. But in other areas I may well be ahead of the curve. After all you probably read for the very first time in the Parish Magazine that *sick* was indeed the new *wicked*. And last week I was pleased to see that the rest of the world is catching up with me in another area. Some of you may remember that last year I wrote to a number of appropriate people suggesting that those of us who received a winter Fuel Allowance and didn't really need it should contribute half of it to the Crisis at Christmas appeal. And a very good response I got too. I was deeply heartened by the number of people who said that they already gave it away. Even so I managed to raise over £4,000 for Crisis. So I read with great interest in the Times that a number of well known personalities were urging us to give up our Winter

Fuel allowance to the Community Foundation Network. This will redistribute the allowance to those who really need it in the same locality, thus allowing charity to begin at home. So where Compton leads the rest will eventually follow-well sometimes Fairly predictably there have been a number of knocking comments for example in the Letters Page of the today's Times.

But I have often observed rich people will always find reasons for not giving to poor people, often very good reasons, but somehow, to my mind, not totally convincing Parson Hawker the Vicar of Morwenstow in Cornwall who among other things wrote the Song of the Western men with its refrain and shall Trelawney live and shall Trelawney die, Parson Hawker was once reprimanded by one of his neighbours for giving food to a vagrant. It openly encouraged him in his vagrancy, he was told. It would have been better to have sent him to the Workhouse. "I know nothing of economics, said Hawker, but I do know poverty when I see it." Hawker's accuser was right of course but somehow but in a way that none of us can feel entirely comfortable with.

I suspect that the goats in this morning's terrifying gospel parable probably had awfully good reasons for not doing the things that the king certainly thought that they ought to have done, but which conspicuously they had failed to do. Always the arresting thing about the parable is the incomprehension of both the sheep and the goats. The goats are secure in their religion and think they have earned their place in the kingdom. Equally the sheep have no great expectation and are dumbfounded by their reward. And perhaps it is worth pointing out that there is more than one way of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and so. After all the way that our society is organised the opportunities for such obvious ways of charity are not common. We can be generous to charities I hope, but just giving money isn't all there is.

It is criminal to let those who are hungry for food remain hungry, but there is also such a thing as spiritual hunger, and often the selfishness and arrogance which drove the goats to disregard the hungry was in fact their own spiritual hunger and thirst for meaning, unfulfilled and unrecognised. And sometimes those who are depressed or ground down need the bread of encouragement. Those in prison need and deserve visitors, and prison visiting remains a great act of service to others. But again there is more than one kind of cell in which people are imprisoned. Prejudices, fears, worries, childhood traumas, and

many other things can all imprison us. Those imprisoned in this way need visiting, in the sense of friendship or encouragement or just the gift of laughter. And is anyone more naked than those who are unloved. Who feel that no one in the world cares for them. Devoid of real contact with their fellow humans they face the world needing to be clothed with affection and care and concern, to feel that they are not alone, to have their faces adorned with gladness.

So what the sheep had I think was generosity. That was the quality which inspired their lives and enabled them to be worthy to share in the life of the kingdom. An instinctive generosity and not calculating, sometimes thoughtful and not just impulsive. And not just generosity with money and material things, essential though such generosity is to the life of a Christian, or generosity of time and energy, again essential as they are, but a generosity of spirit, a generosity of heart and a generosity of mind. Once you have those then the others follow easily and clearly. And following the example of the sheep in this way will enable us to hear

Come you that are blessed by my Father receive the kingdom.



SERMON PREACHED BY THE RECTOR,
REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY 2011

Show us your grief.

Words on a banner held aloft during those ghastly days following the death of Princess Diana and aimed at her sons, William and Harry. Show us your grief. During the first week of September 1997, two worlds colliding with the force of a high speed car crash.

On Remembrance Sunday a number of worlds meet which during the previous 364 days have jogged along or kept their distance or indeed barely been aware of each other. Sometimes the fit is smooth and snug; sometimes it is more abrasive, there is indeed a rub: and sometimes it is more like a car crash.

Church and state. How easily those words trip off the tongue and how suited to each other they seem, not least because the Queen is both Head of State and also Supreme Governor of the Church of England. Since Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire at the beginning of the fifth century it has been assumed by the state at any rate that the church is there to back up the natural order and to bless the great occasions of state. And so it is – up to a point. Because Christians are citizens of another country and owe allegiance to another monarch. And the Christian who forgets this may well come to recognise Cardinal Wolsey's dying words

Had I but served my God with half the zeal I served my king, he would not in mine old age have left me naked to mine enemies. And priests wrapped up in the Union Jack during the First World War soon found their easily won popularity evaporating and with it their self respect and the respect of others.

The wartime Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple said that the only prayer a Christian could offer in wartime England had to be a prayer that a German Christian could equally offer. Robert Runcie got into trouble with Mrs Thatcher for what she saw as a less than patriotic performance at the Falklands Thanksgiving service, when prayers for the Argentinean dead were included. Rowan Williams' twelve second silence on the Today programme when he was asked if the war in Iraq was immoral, that silence spoke volumes, to the government of the day irritating volumes. And so the tale could be told a hundred times over. The fit between church and state isn't always snug, even on Remembrance Sunday when the church may well want to say something not all wish to hear.

Remembrance is a patriotic occasion, a time for legitimate pride. But our instinctive and grateful patriotism always runs up against more universal themes of justice, freedom and security; and talk of the unity of humankind.

That we are brothers and sisters the world over, not least as a way of hoping that the terrible cost of war is not something that that is willingly or carelessly repeated. And we have to recognise that grief is grief whether it is a British, German or Russian or Afghan. So Remembrance speaks of human solidarity and again that can sometimes fit ill with the natural desire for a patriotic response.

By far the best monument to grief I have seen is in a German war cemetery in Belgium, The Grieving Parents by Kathe Kollwitz. The father hugs his grief to himself as men tend to. The woman shrieks hers to the world with outstretched arms. Grief is grief and it transcends all our notions of patriotism and loyalty.

Grief is an intensely personal thing. And for many the personal and the public do not always coincide. I well remember being with an uncle of mine one Remembrance weekend. It was his 80th birthday and I asked him whether he wanted to watch the Service of remembrance on the TV. Not likely he said I spent my 21st birthday going over the top at Ypres. I do not want to spend my 80th birthday remembering I would rather forget. And I have lost count of the times that I have taken a funeral and inquired about the

dead persons war experiences, especially if they had medals which seemed to suggest great daring or bravery

“Oh they never liked talking about it”, would come the reply. And why should they? And who were any of us to have told them what they should or shouldn't have done.

And on an intensely personal note, for me Remembrance weekend will always be overlaid with the personal, nothing to do with anybody else or the nation or public events. Nothing to do with what the rest of the nation are doing. Completely private and in the greater scheme of things nothing to do with what we are doing today. But that is my experience and my memory and my grief and no one can tell me otherwise.

And I often wonder how widows in particular reconcile their personal grief with their pride and the nation's gratitude. How do they all fit together? Sometimes different worlds really do come together with the force of a collision.

As most of you will know this will be the last Remembrance sermon I shall preach as Rector of this Parish. And so I want to end by saying something that I said in my very first sermon. I told the story of how Lyn and I had visited the war graves cemetery at Tyne Cot nears Ypres in Belgium. There was a visitor's book with a space for comments. Some comments were moving and personal, some were banal.

Lyn and I, neither of us normally unable to find the right words for an occasion, Lyn and I could think of nothing so we signed the book but left the comments column blank.

And it struck me then as it strikes me even more forcefully today, that is why at the centre of our nation's Act of Remembrance there isn't a moving prayer, though there are plenty to choose from, there isn't a poem or piece of prose, whether religious or secular, though goodness knows that there are a myriad of suitable pieces to choose from: there isn't a hymn or a piece of music, unbelievably moving though they can be. There is a silence.

Two minutes which unquestionably unites the nation in a single act of solidarity, but also gives space to each and everyone of us to remember, or indeed not remember, as each one of us chooses. A silence in which it doesn't matter that so many different worlds come into contact, sometimes snugly, sometimes abrasively and sometimes colliding. A silence both personal and public, a silence whose precise meaning is known only to God, known to God and understood by him.



