

I have a story to tell you about Jack. Jack is a 4 year-old child with autism, in the congregation at my previous church in Exeter. During an All Age Service one Sunday morning, Tom, the vicar, invited the children to come up to the communion table as he prepared the bread and wine and said the Eucharistic prayers.

I was sitting in the choir, with a clear view of Jack as he stood next to Tom. Jack's face had a look of serious concentration, his eyes carefully following Tom as he prayed over and lifted first the bread, and then the wine. Then came the epiclesis, the prayer to invoke the Holy Spirit to bless the elements and the congregation about to receive communion.

Jack's reaction to this prayer amazed me. As Tom prayed "Father, by your Holy Spirit let these gifts of your creation be to us the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ..." Jack began to clap his hands with exuberant delight, his eyes bright and a huge smile across his face. This child, who couldn't have understood the words or their spiritual significance at a cognitive level, seemed to have no doubt that the Holy Spirit was there and that this was cause for great celebration.

At the end of the service, I asked the vicar if he had noticed and been as deeply moved by Jack's response as I had, to which Tom casually replied that Jack was autistic and just behaved oddly at times.

***"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord.'"***

This second Sunday of Advent we remember the role of the prophets in proclaiming God's promise of restoration and salvation. For the Christian church this promise is fulfilled in the coming of Jesus, the Messiah, the one who unites heaven and earth, who reveals God's love and glory and who comes...as a vulnerable child.

The passages of scripture from Isaiah and 2 Peter herald the coming of the Lord with beautiful, paradoxical language. They tell of a powerful God who can set the heavens ablaze, who is unconstrained by time, who can turn over the structures of creation, lifting up the valleys and making low the mountains. But this is the same God who desires to comfort his people, to speak tenderly to them, to gather and nurture them in his arms like a shepherd. Is this Jack's God, incarnate in Christ and mysteriously poured out through the Holy Spirit?

This morning's words from the Old and New Testaments are united in the place of wilderness. It is in the wilderness that the words of the Hebrew prophets are fulfilled in the appearance of John the Baptist, the messenger who comes to proclaim a baptism of repentance to prepare for the coming of the Son of God. The prophets associated wilderness with eschatological hope because this was the place of transition between Israel's captivity in Egypt and their entrance into the Promised Land. Wilderness was a location of divine significance, of transformation through turning back to God.

Advent is a time of wilderness, of waiting, a time of eschatological hope as we look forward to God's incarnation through the birth of Jesus. Unlike the writer of 2 Peter, we may not expect the second coming of Christ to be imminent, but in this world of despair and austerity, of war and poverty, Advent can be a deeply meaningful season of repentance and restoration.

What does a season of repentance mean for us? Repentance is not so much about regretting what is past as a coming back to God, a reconciliation, an opportunity to be reconciled with the presence of God within ourselves and within others, to be more profoundly aware and awake to Christ within us, our neighbourhood and our world.

What can we learn about repentance and reconciliation through the perspective of the child?

There is a story of another young child's understanding of God retold in a book by Marcus Borg. A 3 year-old girl had been the only child in her family until her mother was pregnant again. The child was very excited about the prospect of a brother or sister and within a few hours of her parents bringing a baby boy home from hospital, she made a passionate request to be alone with her new brother in his room, with the door closed. Her insistence made her parents nervous until they remembered that they had a baby monitor installed so, if they had the slightest indication of anything strange happening, they could be there in an instant.

They let the little girl go to the baby's nursery, shut the door and returned quickly to listen to the monitor. "They heard their daughter's footsteps moving across the room, imagined her standing over the cot and then they heard her saying to her three day old brother, "Tell me about God – I've almost forgotten".

As Marcus Borg suggests, in our growing up, we increasingly forget the one from whom we came and in whom we live and have our being. We can become less aware of God's tangible presence in our lives.

From her study of children's spirituality, Rebecca Nye concludes that they have a more holistic way of seeing things, not analysing as much as adults and therefore having a natural capacity for wonder and mystery. She proposes that the child has an innate ability to be in love with God. Nye quotes research into spirituality across churches in Finland that found that whilst 80 percent of 7 year olds and 60 percent of 11 year olds spoke of times of being aware of God's presence, only 30 percent of adults recalled similar experiences.

Advent is a time of waiting for the coming of the Christ-child, Emmanuel, God with us. Can this time of repentance and restoration be a season of deeper contemplation of who God is in our lives? Can Advent hold the promise of reconciliation with the child within us, the child who remembers God, the child like Jack who prophetically rejoices at the Holy Spirit's glorious, yet tender presence in the Eucharist?

And can this Advent be a time of being reconciled with God in others, of seeing and hearing Christ in the prophets of our day, the voices who cry out in the wilderness? Through the loud noise of consumerism that infiltrates Christmas, can we open our hearts to hear the prophetic proclamation of those whose struggles and visions are not heard in our society? Those who are homeless, mentally ill, disabled, the abused and the abuser? Are we prayerfully awake to the constant hope of the incarnate Christ in the joys and the sufferings of our world?

**“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”**

As I finish, let us continue our contemplation of the coming of the Christ, and the prophetic call to turn back to God, with a poem by Rowan Williams entitled Advent Calendar.

*He will come like last leaf's fall.  
One night when the November wind  
has flayed the trees to the bone, and earth  
wakes choking on the mould,  
the soft shroud's folding.*

*He will come like frost.  
One morning when the shrinking earth  
opens on mist, to find itself  
arrested in the net  
of alien, sword-set beauty.*

*He will come like dark.  
One evening when the bursting red  
December sun draws up the sheet  
and penny-masks its eye to yield  
the star-snowed fields of sky.*

*He will come, will come,  
will come like crying in the night,  
like blood, like breaking,  
as the earth writhes to toss him free.  
**He will come like child.***

(Sermon from Catherine Matlock but delivered by Simon Foster because of snow.)