

Advent 2, Year C 6 December 2009 St Mary's Iffley

Think Big – Start Small – Let God Help

Malachi 3.1-4 + the *Benedictus* (Luke 1.67-79) + Philippians 1.3-11 +
Luke 3.1-6

Stephen Cottrell, the Bishop of Reading, has a wonderful story in his little book, *Do Nothing Christmas is Coming* (p. 14), about a government minister who was interviewed for a newspaper story about what public figures wanted for Christmas:

Not wanting to appear too grasping, he said that he rather liked those bottles of stem ginger that you see in the shops around this time of year. And so the article ran: 'We asked leading figures what they wanted for Christmas. The Archbishop of Canterbury said he wanted an end to the violence in Iraq. The Dalai Lama said he wanted peace in the Middle East. The Pope said he wanted an end to poverty. The Minister for Trade and Industry said he wanted a jar of stem ginger'.

What do YOU want for Christmas? World peace or a jar of stem ginger?

Before we laugh at the hapless minister for Trade and Industry, actually, from a Christian point of view, the modesty of his desires is rather laudable. Part of discipleship in Advent *is* getting back to basics. We hear prophets like Jeremiah, Malachi and John the Baptist, who condemn prevailing social values and conspicuous consumption, and who exhort us to cast off alien seductions and return to a simple, clean life before God.

The modesty of preferring a jar of stem ginger to a new Ferrari seems especially appropriate this Advent, when recession and climate change dominate public discourse, when the threat of climate chaos provides apocalyptic images that mirror the apocalyptic images in our Advent readings and hymns. Everything we read about the probable consequences of climate change: drought, flood, mass migration and war over resources – if not in our lifetime, then in that of our children or grandchildren – calls us to wake up and change our ways. Advent's wake-up call to consume less is timeless, but it is also urgently timely. So it *is* a virtue to be 'downsizing' our desires this Christmas, for all sorts of reasons.

So what will it be this year? World peace or stem ginger?

John the Baptist, in our gospel lesson this week, and especially again in next week's gospel, encourages us to think BIG – he engages the big themes of redemption, justice, mercy and judgement, of radical personal transformation and radical social transformation. So this homily, following the Baptist's cue, is about thinking BIG this Advent. But it's also about starting small – and letting God help.

THREE THINGS: THINK BIG – START SMALL – LET GOD HELP.

First, THINK BIG.

What is your deepest desire this Christmas? What is your soul's greatest need?

It's probably not something very easy to fit under the tree.

If you could wave a magic wand, what would it be?

It might be health, for yourself, for someone you love.

It could be as simple as a good night's sleep after weeks of insomnia.

It could be to get off the treadmill, even for just a minute, and have time for yourself.

It could be companionship, to ease the ache of loneliness if you have lost someone.

It could be reconciliation – with God, with a son, a daughter, a spouse, a sibling, parents, a friend, a work colleague – or even with yourself.

It could be a prayer life that really brings you close to Jesus, and brings you joy and peace.

It could be for world leaders to abandon politics as usual and come to a real breakthrough on climate change and carbon reduction in Copenhagen.

What in your life, or in our common life, seems completely intractable, hopeless of solution, in need of the kind of radical transformation preached by John the Baptist?

That's where to begin with our Christmas wish lists this year.

But how *do* we begin, where do we begin?

- I can't solve global warming all by myself.

- My brother would hang up on me if I tried to ring him; we haven't spoken for ten years.
- She will never forgive me for what I said, it's too late now to try.
- I can't possibly stop: everything would fall apart; there's just too much to do.
- I'm too ashamed to admit what I did, it's better to try to forget it.

Defeatist thoughts are sure to crowd in, but Advent is the season for leaps of faith, the season to banish defeatism! John the Baptist can help us in this; the Virgin Mary, our patron, can too. John, our guide this week and also next week, never took no for an answer. He encourages us to THINK BIG this Advent: these festering things in our lives, NOW is the time to wake up, wash ourselves clean, and make a change, so we can greet the Lord unashamed when he comes (as Paul prays for the Philippians).

Mary, from whom we will hear on Advent IV, also encourages us to THINK BIG, in her *Magnificat* and her life story: the mighty *can* be put down from their thrones, the humble *can* be exalted, nothing is impossible with God (Luke 1.46-55, 37).

But how? It's easy to THINK BIG, but how do we DO big?

By starting small.

Our second point this morning is 'start small'.

Bringing about the world's redemption by giving birth to the Saviour is about as BIG as you can get – but it started out with one word of assent from Mary – in Luke's Greek, *genoito*, in Latin, *fiat* – yes – may it be.

Bringing about the world's redemption by preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as John did, is pretty BIG – but he did it one baptism and one sinner at a time.

THINK BIG – but start small.

What BIG, IMPOSSIBLE THING does your heart yearn for this Christmas?

What small thing can you do to bring it closer?

Maybe, something comes to mind right away -- it's on the tip of your soul. Maybe, however, what you *really* want is so deeply buried, under so many layers of denial or disappointment, that it will take a long time to find and excavate it.

How do we find what we really want, our true soul's desire?

Here we begin our third point, LET GOD HELP.

One good place to start is right in front of us, with that folded sheet of A4 paper we were given when we walked in the door. It may look like an ordinary service leaflet, but it is really – a gift. This is no ordinary piece of A4: this is an extraordinary tool for transformation – but only if we take it home, and *use* it in reflection on the week's readings and prayers. Here is where we let God in on the process.

So let's have a closer look, and look again at what we have just heard read.

The prophet Malachi tells us why we should wake up and listen to John the Baptist: we do not know when the Lord will come, but it will be sudden and terrible. Who can endure the day of the Lord's coming? Repent now, before it's too late.

Then, opening up, there is the canticle, the *Benedictus*. We have this here because it is the song of John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, in Luke's gospel, after John's miraculous birth and naming (Luke 1.67-79). This canticle is a second gift to us: one thing we can do to mark out Advent as a special season is to pray the *Benedictus* every morning, together with Christians all over the world who are doing the same thing at Morning Prayer. It is yet another gift for us to unwrap and use. It gives voice to the deepest longings of the children of Israel, and gives voice also to our own longings for salvation, forgiveness, compassion, illumination, and peace. If you take on one thing this Advent, a daily *Benedictus* is a good one to do.

Paul's letter to the Philippians – Paul's heart is completely open – he shows us his deepest longings for the Christians at Philippi – and this passage is one that we can meditate on deeply this week, to make our prayers one with his, and help us find OUR deepest longing for those whom we love.

And finally, the gospel: John the Baptist's challenge to us, to prepare the way of the Lord – to seek forgiveness, to be honest about the rough and rocky places in our lives, the potholes we get stuck in, those dark places where we don't let God or others in – and to DO something about them, to think BIG about what we want, and to take the first small steps towards making it happen.

By now, I hope you are as excited about this piece of paper as a small child with a new toy – but there's more. (So many gifts this morning, seems like Christmas already!)

The FINAL GIFT on this piece of paper, is the best of all: it is the two blank spaces on the back, above and below the Advent candle song. This space is for you – and God – to pray over and write in.

Remember our third point: LET GOD HELP.

These blank spaces after the readings are soul spaces – left open for us, and for God. God longs to give us our soul’s desire, what will make us truly happy. As we prayed at the beginning of the service, in God all our desires are known. But we have to give him – and ourselves – space to help us discern our desires.

So my prayer for all of us is that we will take this leaflet home, pray with the readings and the prayers, meditate on them this week in our prayer time, asking our Lord for insight and discernment. And when it comes to you, when you know what you REALLY want this Christmas, write that above the candle song, so you can remember and pray with it all through Advent. You’ve thought big.

Then it’s time to think SMALL, ask our Lord to show you what small step or steps you can take to begin to make that big, deep, impossible thing happen. This may take a while, especially if what you need is deeply buried inside. But once you’ve seen how to start, then, below the song, write down that step or steps. Promise our Lord, that, with his help, you will make a start. If along the way you get discouraged, remember our special Advent companions, John the Baptist, and Mary, who experienced so powerfully in their lives that the most impossible transformations can happen.

World peace – or stem ginger?

THINK BIG – start small – let God help – and prepare the way of the Lord!

May the Lord richly bless us this Advent with our heart’s desire. *Amen.*

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Stephen Cottrell, *Do Nothing Christmas is Coming: an Advent Calendar with a Difference* (London, 2008).

Keith Jones, *Adam’s Dream: Human Longings and the Love of God* (London, 2007).