**

Philippians 4.4-7**
**Luke 3.7-18
12th December 2021**

## Two Contexts

*Gracious God – we open the bible and long to receive your word – open, we pray, our minds and hearts to receive that word with all its comfort and in all its challenge. Amen*.

John the Baptist or St Paul…which one, I wonder, would you invite for Christmas lunch?

We come across them both in the readings set for today. We find one in The Wilderness, the other in prison.

In Luke chapter three a crowd clusters around a fiery preacher. People are leaving the towns and villages where they live and worship and walking out to wilderness and maybe it’s both the preacher and the place that draws them.

Certainly John the Baptizer seems to be getting a name for himself as someone worth listening to. John was ‘old school’, more Old Testament prophet than New Testament rabbi. His message was severe, his manner intense and his methods unorthodox.

Yet, I suspect his context also played a part in his success.

John preached in The Wilderness. That high strip of arid land that ran, rather like a spine, down the middle of Israel. Wilderness meant something to people in John’s day. Something symbolic and something real.

Wilderness stood for; retreat, encounter and discovery. Here, with an unencumbered focus there was a heightened sense of expectation that you could meet with God in fresh ways.

That was part of Israel’s story. Moses led the people through Wilderness and in those forty years of wondering they discovered themselves by encountering God.

So, in a way, John was only half the story because the context made up the rest.

Which is good really because, when you think about it, John’s message, although preached with great conviction, was hardly new or significantly different from what had been preached many times before.

He calls his listeners to live well by living ethically and in that he reflects the sort of injunctions given by the prophet Amos in the past, and he foreshadows the message of Jesus in The Sermon on the Mount in the future.

What does he say in today’s reading: share your possessions with those who have less than you and feed the hungry. To the Tax Collectors he says: don’t over charge, and to the Soldiers: don’t bully.

None of this was particularly new, and yet it seems to have been heard differently by his audience. It moved them to repentance and baptism. And this was John’s deepest wish, that in some way, he might prepare the ground for Jesus.

Often, I suspect, for us context can be as significant as content.

As a minister I’ve sometimes observed, when people come back from a conference or church assembly and they tell me how wonderful it was and I asked them what the platform preacher spoke on – I’m left wondering why it made such a positive impression. Isn’t that what we talk about here? Why don’t these members of the congregation become as excited on a Sunday as when they were away?

Well, that’s the point, I think – they were in a different place when they heard it. And it’s my own experience too.

Sometimes we are more receptive and our hearts more open to God when our context is different from the norm.

Our senses are heightened along with our expectation when we are on retreat, in conference, at a different church or even in our usual one but at a new phase of our lives.

The other day I came across a story on a news website of a rock singer whose wife had just had a baby. It’s fantastic, he declared, I feel my life is so different, so much more fulfilled now I have a son. Well, for him it was early days, wait (I thought) for the terrible twos! But it was great to read. His excitement, his wonder at life now he was in this new phase, this wonderful phase of being a new dad.

Context is often just as important as content. And here in The Wilderness, John’s audience hear these old truths with new ears as they find themselves in a new phase of their faith pilgrimage. And, his words pierce their hearts, and they return to their regular lives spiritually renewed with fresh conviction and longing.

He’s seems quite a stern preacher, and that may be a consideration if you’re thinking of inviting him for Christmas, along with the fact he’d only want wild locusts and honey for lunch, none of that turkey business!

Part of his message was to tare down the notion of religious privilege. It was no good, he says, for his listeners to rely on their pedigree as Abraham’s Children.

Religious pride is nothing new.

Yet how easy it is to want to own a label without taking on the responsibility that comes with wearing it.

We even invent phrases like: I’m a secular Jew or a non-practicing Catholic. We know what that means. We respect that the person is basically saying ‘ I come from a Jewish past, or I grew up within a Christian tradition’, but these are basically the things I’ve learnt to forget.

John said to his audience that if faith was relegated to nothing more than a family tree or a vague cultural identity, then it would be cut down and used as nothing more than kindling wood.

Instead his calls upon them to own their heritage, to refresh their tradition and to repent. To have a sense of remorse for the way they might have neglected God, hurt neighbour and forgotten the way of love – a remorse that would lead to change and renewal.

In a way he asks them to make a connection between attitude and behaviour. To seek to grow within them an attitude of goodness, based on love and inspired by God, that flows into the behaviour of goodness that blesses all around them.

So, I guess if you want a person of integrity around your table, a serious disciple, even if he’s a somewhat peculiar dresser in his camel hair get up, maybe John’s your Christmas Day guest!

So, one context was Wilderness and the other is Prison for today’s gospel is paired with a reading from Paul’s letter to the Philippians, one of his last and one written, we think, from his prison cell in Rome.

In chapter four he’s about to sign off and he does so with those words that have become much loved down the centuries: *Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice.*
The word rejoice in Greek can also be translated Farewell. To travel well, to fare well on a journey, says Paul is, as it were, to be a person, who even in prison, can rejoice.

Paul, along with the majority of the early Church believed in a physical Second Coming of Jesus which was imminent. Yet, I suspect, that Paul already knew that his execution would come first.

So, in his own final days of waiting, what sustained him in his cell?

I think it’s clear that his memories of the days he spent at Philippi give him great joy and sustaining comfort.

Philippi was then a thriving trading town, famous for its gold mining and its minting of gold coins. In fact, it was so popular that Roman soldiers often retired there with their families, a sort of first century Eastbourne!

For Paul it surely held a mixture of memories, after all he’d also been arrested and imprisoned in Philippi. Yet these are not days he regrets.

He healed a girl there who was possessed. And for Paul, and the early Church, healings were always seen as the blessing of God, once again enabling a person to know wholeness and freedom. Paul was arrested for helping this girl and along with Silas thrown into a Philippian gaol.

Were they downcast? No. They rejoiced by singing songs at midnight. There’s an earthquake, the gaol’s walls are breached yet Paul urges the other prisoners not to escape, thus saving the gaoler from execution. The next day he baptises the gaoler and his family.

Not his only baptism in Philippi, he also meets up with Lydia and her prayer gathering by the river and baptises her and her household too.

In this place and with these people Paul had known both struggle and companionship and it made him glad.

So, he’s not a Stoic with a stiff upper lip, and there were plenty of them around in his day. Stoics prayed to stern and cold gods and lived their lives suppressing feeling and emotion. For them life was safest if governed entirely by the head, never referencing the heart.

But not Paul. Rejoice, he says, and again I say Rejoice!

Of course his joy both flares and flickers, for there were moments for him, as of course there are for us, when life is hard going, when our questions remain unanswered, and maybe we are more conscious of believing in joy rather than, at that moment, experiencing it.

In his cell Paul affirms his belief in the love and hope of God. And because of that can we not say: Rome didn’t win.

So, two contexts this morning, both with a sense of waiting intrinsic to them, so good Advent themes for us.

Wilderness, where faith once again comes alive. And Prison, where joy stays real.

So, maybe put out two extra chairs for Christmas lunch and invite them both.

Certainly this Christmas make room for serious faith and deep-down joy.

May it be so, in the name of the God who meets us in the waiting and strengthens us in the struggle. Amen.

*Ian Green, Amersham, 6th December 2021*