

SERMON: 16 December 2018 – Rev Alistair Cowper

**“Good news for vipers”
(Isaiah 12:2-6 and Luke 3:7-18)**

There are some great lines in today’s readings for this third Sunday in advent.

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Isaiah 12 tells us that God has come to save;
that God gives victory;
that the Holy One, who lives among us, is great;
and that joy is the result of receiving these truths.

Remember, the context of these words is to an oppressed people, living under the threat of invasion by a powerful enemy and before the exile to a foreign land as prisoners.

That’s the recipe for quite a storm.
But God doesn’t seem to be put off by storms.
I love the story that John tells about Jesus after the feeding of the 5,000.

Because of this amazing miracle the crowds tried to force him to become their king. God doesn’t work that way. Coercion isn’t God’s bag. Its always invitation.

So we see Jesus exemplifying God’s response to the crowd. He disappears up a mountain!

And even the disciples can’t find him anywhere so they get back into their boat and start to make their way back to the other side of the lake.

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And perhaps not surprisingly there’s a great storm which seems to come out of nowhere and they start to panic. Until they see Jesus walking towards

them and they're keen to let him into the boat and John tells us they immediately reached their destination.

In other words, the presence of God in the person of Jesus, made the difference. In John's version of the story, he doesn't tell us that Jesus calmed the storm. Maybe the storm kept raging but what John wanted to show was that what mattered was the presence of God in the person of Christ.

Brexit's become a bit of a storm hasn't it? We can't cope with it without knowing that the presence of God in Christ is with us.

When John the Baptist talks of the One who was to come after him, who would baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire, he was talking about this presence of God being with us in such a way that we would know it; it would burn in our hearts like fire; we would know the presence intimately.

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When John tells us about Immanuel, he's also pointing to this presence within as God with us. It may have started in Bethlehem but it hasn't ended there. God with us is the truth that Christ is the intimate presence in all of life.

Incarnation is a word that is used to describe this process of God taking on flesh in Christ. We can probably only begin to understand what it means but it's something mysterious about the union of all that is Divine with all that is not.

The first incarnation was the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, known as the Christ, the anointed One, because he was the perfect fusion of human flesh and Holy Spirit.

And that made God easier to love because people could see God in a form that humans could relate to.

But God didn't stop with the incarnation of Jesus (otherwise only the people who lived and saw Jesus of Nazareth in the flesh would be the only ones who could know God intimately). But God wants all to know God intimately and so that was only the beginning of the Body of Christ.

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Paul, in his letter to the Colossians, puts it like this: Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us (3:11).

What does that mean? Paul goes on to say, 'let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts' and 'let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill your lives'.

So then, the life of Christ, the Spirit of Christ, is the root of life in us, and is this presence of God which John the Baptist prepared people to receive, and which even today, we're passing on to one another the invitation to receive the same Christ presence.

That's good news. And its surely the point of preaching.

SLIDE

Something that struck me this week is in this story of John the Baptist is that he seems to be giving the crowds a hard time. He calls them vipers, snakes and he shouts at them. But Luke tells us at the end of this episode that 'John used many such warnings as he announced the *Good News* to the people'.

Good news might mean its time to turn back, rather than keep on doing the same thing.

It might mean its time to stop a certain way of living. It might mean its time to start living.

It might mean its time to start sharing clothing and food with the poor.

It might mean its time to be content with what we have.

It might mean making room for more of Christ,

Until Christ is all and is in all.

Go then, and be Christ in this world, remembering the words of Saint Teresa of Avila;

Christ has no body now on earth but yours;

no hands but yours;

no feet but yours.

Yours are the eyes through which the compassion of Christ must look out on the world.

Yours are the feet with which Christ is to go about doing good.

Yours are the hands with which Christ is to bless all people