

VIEWS FROM THE PEWS: – Matt 3:1-12 - A Voice in the Wilderness

Today is the second Sunday in Advent and the “Go before Gospel” set down in the lectionary rehearses the story of John the Baptist. John was the son of Zachariah and Elizabeth and thereby a cousin of Our Lord. In Luke 1 we learn that Zachariah was a priest and a descendant of Aaron and that Elizabeth was barren in her old age.

Their son was to be called “John” and his life would be dedicated to announcing the advent of Jesus the Messiah. At the beginning of his ministry John spent time in what the Bible calls “the wilderness”. This was not a desert as we envisage it from this distance, but a reasonably fertile area that could produce food although John’s diet was recorded as “locusts and wild honey” . We can’t be sure that what was meant was not “locust beans” (although the insects were eaten by the very poor and John probably fell into this category).

While we would undoubtedly draw the line at a lunch of locusts we should remind ourselves that we sometimes eat food that would be considered odd in the extreme by middle-eastern folk. Think of the offal meats that we consider delicacies and pork described as unclean in the east. It is a matter of custom, but if we are to understand the Gospel fully we would need to have some understanding of middle-eastern customs and habits.

As a prophet John drew crowds to hear his word. His God-given task was to proclaim the coming of Jesus and to call for the repentance of the people if they were to follow the Messiah. He attracted many including Pharisees and Sadducees who he called “vipers” because they were insincere with respect to their response to John’s call.

John explained that he was baptising with water for repentance but when Jesus came he would baptise his followers with the Holy Spirit and with fire. John’s words were gathered together within a warning about sorting the wheat from the chaff. Which are we?

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