

## **The Forerunners of Christ**      by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> November 2020 (Advent Sunday) at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst (Evening Advent Celebration Service)

### **Readings:**

1<sup>st</sup> Reading: Genesis 12:1-7    The calling of Abraham

2<sup>nd</sup> Reading: Isaiah 11:1-9    The prophet Isaiah foretells the coming of the Messiah

3<sup>rd</sup> Reading: Luke 1:26-38    The calling of Mary

4<sup>th</sup> Reading: Mark 1:1-8      The mission of John the Baptist

### **Introduction**

Today is Advent Sunday, the beginning of the season of Advent. For many people who are not familiar with church traditions, the word that goes with Advent is "calendar", which is a way of counting down to Christmas while enjoying a piece of chocolate each day. You might consider it a way of preparing our bodies for the feasting to come! In various streets around Sandhurst people are already anticipating Christmas with fairy lights on their houses, illuminated reindeer and the like. And of course, commercially Christmas is the time the shops make most of their money, although with the current Covid restrictions it has been anything but a time of good cheer.

But for Christians, Advent is the season in which we prepare both for the celebration of Christmas and for the Second Coming of Christ as our Judge. In other words, preparing ourselves spiritually to receive Christ as our Saviour and our Judge is more important than decorating our houses, stocking up on food or buying presents. Many people buy an Advent Candle, marked in 24 sections like an Advent calendar, a useful prompt to have a time of quiet reflection and prayer each day. We have them for sale at the back of the church.

A few minutes ago, we lit the first candle of our Advent Wreath. You can find different interpretations of the four candles of Advent online, often based on themes like Hope, Love, Joy and Peace or Purity. Here at St Michael's we use them to remind us of how God put his plan of salvation into action through people who responded to his calling. Each of them played a part in God's preparation for the coming of Jesus at Christmas: the Patriarchs and Prophets of the Old Testament, John the Baptist and Mary. In our four readings this evening we heard of the calling of Abraham, the patriarch of the people of Israel; of Isaiah's prophetic role in heralding the coming of God's Kingdom; of Mary's openness as a servant of God to be the mother of God incarnate; and of John the Baptist's fearless challenge to people to turn away from sin and welcome the coming Messiah. The words of the

anthems and hymns used in this service echo these themes and link them to our own preparation for receiving Christ as our Saviour and Judge.

So what would it mean for us to prepare ourselves spiritually for the coming of Christ, both in our Christmas celebrations and as we wait for him to come as Judge of the whole world? To answer this, I'd like to share a few reflections on the key qualities of the forerunners of Christ which we would do well to cultivate in ourselves.

## **Abraham**

Let's start with our first candle, representing the Patriarchs, the ancestors of the people of Israel. Many of you will remember our sermon series on Abraham earlier this year, where we saw that this great ancestor of the three "Abrahamic faiths" was quite a flawed individual. But none-the-less, he is referred to later in the Bible as the "Friend of God", to whom God gave a glimpse of his purposes to bless all the nations of the earth. Abraham is also known as a man of **faith**, and this is the quality which I suggest we seek to emulate. Abraham's story is one of journey – from his home in Mesopotamia to the Promised Land, and from one place to another, living in a tent like a Bedouin with flocks and herds. Abraham faces many dangers from without, but also many doubts and conflicts from within. His wife cannot have children, and yet Abraham is promised a son. After his son Isaac is born, his faith is tested when he is asked to sacrifice him, although God never intends him to go through with that sacrifice.

Like Abraham, we face many uncertainties in life. And our journey of life, and of faith, can be full of challenges and dangers. But just as Abraham had faith and was God's friend, so Jesus invites us to put our trust in him and be his friend. Have you responded to this invitation? To do so is a step of faith, and to continue on your journey also requires faith. Faith and trust are part of any relationship. But relationships can grow cold through lack of communication. This Advent, ask yourself how your relationship with Jesus is going. Has it become distant, or are you growing closer together? Why not take time to enjoy the presence of Christ in prayer, worship and bible study. Bring to him your needs and the needs of the world and those you love. Trust in his promise that "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 29:20).

## **Isaiah**

Our second candle represents the prophets of the Old Testament. The book of Isaiah is the longest in the Bible, and is packed full of messages from God to his people – messages of rebuke and warning, but also of hope and comfort. Our reading from Isaiah this evening contains a vision of what God's Kingdom would be like under the rule of the Messiah, who is described as "a shoot from the stump of Jesse" and "a branch [which] shall grow out of his roots." Jesse, of course, was the father of King David, and the Old Testament looked forward to one of his descendants being the promised Messiah, or Christ, the anointed one of God. His

reign would be one of justice and peace, in which God says that “They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain” (Isaiah 11:9). Our first anthem this evening was a setting of other words from Isaiah, our second anthem “Zion hears the watchmen’s voices” uses imagery from another of his prophecies, and our fourth anthem quoted yet another messianic prophecy from Isaiah.

The prophets had a dual role: to speak God’s word to the situation around them and to raise people’s sights to the wider purposes of God and how his Kingdom might one day be established over all the world. Our second hymn this evening, “Heaven shall not wait” speaks of how in Jesus God acts in the present, addressing issues of injustice and exclusion in our everyday lives.

*Jesus is Lord,  
He has championed the unwanted;  
In him injustice confronts its timely end.*

Isaiah and the prophets were people of **vision**, who saw what God’s kingdom should look like and called people to live according to that vision. The Advent season calls us also to renew *our* vision and live according to it. Let us ask ourselves what kind of world God wants this to be, and whether the way we are living is promoting justice and peace for all.

### **John the Baptist**

John the Baptist is represented by the third candle on our Advent ring, although chronologically his mission came after the calling of Mary, which I will finish with. John’s calling was to follow in the tradition of the ancient prophets, but with a message that was urgent and compelling: “One greater than I is coming”. The quality of John the Baptist that I would like to focus on this evening is his **courage**. The gospels present him as rather rough and ready, plain-speaking and direct. He was not afraid to challenge people to turn away from their sins and make a new start with God. He confronted religious leaders with their hypocrisy, and criticised the ruler Herod Antipas for immorality in his personal life. John’s faithfulness to his message cost him his liberty and then his life.

There are people like John today who are harassed, victimised and even imprisoned and executed for standing up for what is right and just. There may be times when we too need to speak up for God, whether it is by writing to your MP, by challenging unfairness at work, or sticking up for someone in your family or friendship group. We may also need courage to follow God’s prompting to reach out to someone in need, or to make a generous donation of money, or to share our faith with someone or invite them to explore it for themselves. This Advent, let’s consider what it would mean to be courageous for God in our own contexts.

### **Mary**

What about Mary? We all know the story of the Angel Gabriel announcing to Mary that she would be the mother of the Son of God. It might seem to some that Mary

just passively accepts the role that has been assigned to her, as women in her time were expected to do. But I see in Mary's response to the angel, and in her response to things that happen later, a much more active engagement with God's will. When Mary asks the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" she is seeking to understand what is entailed in her calling. When she responds "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word," she is offering herself to God for whatever he will ask of her. It is an enormous act of faith, akin to that of Abraham. But it is also a statement of her **availability** to God.

Being a disciple of Jesus is more than signing up to a particular philosophy, joining the membership roll of a church or being on the mailing list of an organisation you support. It involves the total commitment of our lives to God. That is what Mary did. This Advent, let us ask ourselves whether we are "fairweather" Christians, merely sympathisers with the Christian movement, or whether we are willing to surrender ourselves, our lives, to God as Mary did, so that he can use us for his good purposes in the world.

### **Conclusion**

**Faith** like Abraham; **vision** like the prophets; **courage** like John the Baptist; **availability** to God like Mary. As we prepare to welcome Jesus at Christmas, let's be inspired by these great men and women whom God called, guided, envisioned and empowered in the past, so that when Christ comes again as our judge he may not find us, as the Advent Sunday prayer says, "sleeping in sin but active in his service and joyful in his praise". Amen, come, Lord Jesus!