

Sermon for the Third Sunday in Advent
St Peter De Beauvoir, 12th December 2021

This morning we have lit the third candle in Advent. How are you feeling about Christmas?

Things are still not back to normal. Looking back over the past 20 months, I see a blur of masks, vaccines, travel restrictions, zoom calls, and now, just as we're putting up the decorations, the ominous Omicron.

But we will emerge from this journey; and like Advent, it will lead to something new. Today's readings are all about new beginnings and the power of prayer.

The third candle we have just lit symbolises John the Baptist, and his challenging call for change in today's Gospel reading feels timely.

Last week, Father Simon talked about the Biblical prophets, and how they often tell us uncomfortable truths. Today John the Baptist doesn't hold back. 'You brood of vipers!' he calls the crowd of people who have come to be baptised by him.

Harsh words – I cringed when I read them while preparing this sermon. It's not the greeting one would hope to hear at a baptism.

But John is a truth-teller and his role in the gospels is to prepare the way for the enormous change that is coming in the person of Jesus Christ.

The context he is speaking in is important. This outspoken prophet is living at a time when entrenched power structures are firmly in place. And these structures serve the narrow agendas of the few, instead of the common good of the many.

The big change John predicts is fundamental. Christ is coming. In the words of Jimi Hendrix: the power of love is about to overcome the love of power.

Change has come to St Peter's as well. After months of anticipation, we have finally, joyfully welcomed our new vicar. And with this change will come new questions and new horizons. Will we be ready?

How as a church will we reach out to people, in a world that feels different? This is a world in which the human fear of missing out, that condition we used to call FOMO, seems to have been replaced by something called HOGO – that is, hassle of going out!

Change can make us feel vulnerable. As fragile, complex humans, most of us prefer to go along with the status quo, whatever that might be. At the same time, we don't want John the Baptist or anyone else judging us for our failings.

But in Christianity, judgement works hand in hand with redemption and forgiveness – no one is ever 'cancelled.' There is always a second chance, and a third one, and one after that. In the discomfort of change and challenge, grief and mistakes, there is always hope.

There is always prayer.

St Paul, whose wonderfully honest letters we are reading every week, is an expert on change and prayer. He went through enormous personal change himself. He knows what we're going through.

St Paul never pretends to be perfect; he is shoulder to shoulder with us as we press on through this difficult but exciting journey of faith. His genius is that he is able to transmit to us, through his letters, the goodness, compassion and love of Christ that we all aspire to.

In Philippians, he talks about prayer as a state of mind.

He invites us to enter the reality of Jesus by filling our minds with whatever is truthful, holy, just, pure and noble. He reminds us today: *'In everything resort to prayer with thanksgiving and bring your requests before God.'*

There has been a new burst of prayer over the past few weeks at St Peter's. Almost every day in church begins and ends with morning and evening prayer, and there is often a mid-week Eucharist too. Some of us have never prayed so much in our lives!

So let's make the most of this - even if you can't make it to a service during the week, you may have prayer requests. Why not give your prayer request to Father Simon before you leave church today? Or if you're watching online, you can email them to him.

It feels good to see the church filled with a prayerful spirit for 2022.

As we begin a new chapter of life at St Peter's this Christmas season, I pray that as a church family we heal and we grow, and respond to John the Baptist's call for positive change.

And let us pray together that each one of us can be made whole by becoming completely rooted in truth, in love, in goodness and in justice.

AMEN