

SERMON PREACHED AT SJH ADVENT 3 YEAR C 16 DECEMBER 2018

CHURCH TO BE RADICALLY DIFFERENT FROM WORLD; CONFIDENCE IN GOD WHO JUDGES THE WORLD (Jbap's injunctions).
CREATING GOD IN OUR IMAGE OF NICENESS?

It's good to be nice to one another. I hope we are, as much as possible. Admittedly, 'nice' is an overworked word; doesn't have much of a cutting edge to it. But is it always good to be nice? Most of us don't want to cause offence, so we won't criticise a person to his or her face, even if that's the way we're feeling. We have a typically English reserve, or maybe we think that's how Christians should behave. This approach has its drawbacks. It may mean that people who aren't 'nice', bullies perhaps, are given free rein. Challenging them would be good in the long term, but in the short term it would be painful.

Is not causing offence what S. Paul means when he writes to the Philippian church, 'Let your gentleness be known to everyone'? Probably not. The word he uses can also be translated 'goodness' or 'kindness', words which have more of a spine to them than 'gentleness'. Goodness may mean saying what is right, rather than what you prefer for an easy life, or what you think the other person wants to hear. And there are occasions when we feel we have to be 'cruel to be kind.' The Authorised Version of the Bible, sometime called the King James Version, translates the phrase, 'Let your moderation be known unto men,' which has the sense of reacting in a thoughtful manner. In another of his letters, to the Ephesians, Paul writes about 'speaking the truth in love,' which may not of course be a gentle thing to do. It raises further questions. Am I sure I know what the truth of the situation is? Will the truth be understood by the other person? Am I motivated by love?

I don't think the word 'gentle' could be used of John the Baptist. He calls the crowds a 'brood of vipers.' He warns of wrath to come. He tells them to show repentance by their actions. He attacks their complacency that racial and religious identity – descent from Abraham – is sufficient to deliver them. It is surprising that the gospel passage ends with the summary 'with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.' What would the bad news have been?

A danger of trying to be nice and gentle is that we create God in the same image. We like to think of God as a sympathetic friend offering lots of tender loving care. We want him to sort out our problems. We hope he'll step in when politicians get things wrong, or the National Health Service can't cure us. There are parts of the gospel which support this view of Jesus, who for Christians is the revelation of God the Father, who shows us what God is like. Jesus invited people labouring

under burdens to come to him for rest. But it's not the whole picture, and it's certainly not the impression of Jesus given by John the Baptist. The one who comes after John will baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire. He will separate good from evil – that can be a painful process. 'His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.' Is this a picture of Christ that we accept? Or do we prefer the 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild'?

Jesus uses the image of fire in his ministry as recorded by S. Luke. "I came to cast fire upon the earth; and would that it were already kindled! ... Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division... ." He goes on to say that households will be divided between those who follow him and those who do not.

As you will have heard many times, Advent is about the coming of God's Son into the world. We like Christmas because it's about a baby. Babies make us feel good; they don't challenge us to change our lives, apart from the obvious changes involved in looking after them. Advent, however, poses questions to us. How should our lives change in response to following the adult Jesus? How should the world change? How can we be involved in changing the world? We have to start with where we are, rather as John the Baptist's instructions were specific to the groups he addressed. But they demonstrate general principles. Sharing clothing and food is about the right distribution of wealth. Collecting the prescribed amount is about integrity in dealings with others. Being satisfied with your wages is about greed, but also raises the issue of what a just wage is. Demonstrations in Paris and the gig economy: it's all there. Advent is very much about the present day. It's not nice and gentle!