

## The Third Sunday of Advent 2018

Sermon preached by the Reverend Canon Philip Banks

Gospel reading: Luke 3.7-18

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*“With many other exhortations, [John Baptist] proclaimed the Good news”.*

Imagine yourself standing in front of two different paintings.

The first. A nativity scene: not the birth of Jesus, but a fresco which I lighted upon when I was on retreat in Rome this year<sup>1</sup>. It dates back some 500 years. Bits are missing, but it is still glorious in its polychrome.

It is a nativity scene with a detail I've never seen before. It shows the birth of John the Baptist. Depictions of the Nativity of John the Baptist are not unusual – there are plenty of artists who have depicted that.

What caught me was the way in which *Mary* was depicted.

Picture the scene: *Mary's* cousin Elizabeth has just given birth to John the Baptist: she is reclining on a couch looking somewhat bedraggled, a rather woolly-looking halo around her head. John the Baptist is in swaddling clothes being looked after by his family at one side of the scene.

What caught me was that instead of Zechariah being there in the scene (other John Baptist nativities show Zechariah prominently and writing on a tablet “his name is John”).

No: instead, centre-stage, is *Mary* – clearly pregnant – ministering to her cousin Elizabeth – right by her bedside, holding what looks like a bowl of porridge, and spooning some to Elizabeth.

It caught me as I sat in quiet contemplation of the fresco, because it drew me to *Mary's* words at the Annunciation: “here am I, handmaid of the Lord”. The word used in the original Greek is *Doulé*: which means *helper* or *servant* – or *handmaid*. So – being a handmaid of the Lord was not just about bringing Jesus to birth, but about serving God's purposes of love. How shall I be handmaid, how shall I be Good News? Here is *Mary* straightaway being ‘good news’ in a very

practical way: a handmaid for her cousin Elizabeth at John Baptist's birth: John, who is crucial to the Christian story – beginning to prepare people's hearts for the coming of the Light of the World.

*“So with many other exhortations, [John Baptist] proclaimed the Good news”.*

Now imagine you are standing before my second painting.

If you have been to Malta's co-cathedral in Valetta you'll have seen what is considered by many to be one of Caravaggio's greatest paintings: The Beheading of John Baptist<sup>2</sup>.

It is a massive canvas – you have to stand at the back of the chapel in which it is housed to take it all in. It depicts both the brutality of John Baptist's execution and also the holiness of the man who always directed people *away* from himself and his ego *to* the person and message of Jesus – “one more powerful than me is coming” and “He was not the Light, but came to bear witness to the Light”.

I've often thought that the humility of John Baptist is born of a deep work of God in his life: from his early childhood he will have been aware that God had set him apart for a specific task in salvation history. Zechariah, his father, prophesied at his birth: “*You child shall be the prophet of the most high. You will go before the Lord to prepare his way*”. [Luke2]. Words used daily at Morning Prayer.

For me, the season of Advent does the same task as John Baptist: pointing us in our Christian lives to the Christ, the one whose birth is the true meaning of Christmas. That God, the creator of the universe, though whom and for whom we were created, stepped into our human history.

*“With many other exhortations, [John Baptist] proclaimed the Good News”.*  
*“Here am I, handmaid of the Lord”.*

The question for me and for each of us is the same challenge and call – to be handmaids/servants of the Good News of Jesus, those who point others to Jesus. What do others see in me? What do others see in you? Do my/your words, lifestyle, actions, *reactions* – draw others to, and give others a glimpse of, the light of Christ and his love?

Do I live up to the words of St Francis of Assisi: “No one in God’s service should have a gloomy face or a chilling look”.

Another image for you! I love the season of Advent and Christmas. You may know the scene in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, how Mr Tumnus talks about how “it is always winter and never Christmas” as the forces of darkness in the story gradually grow in power.

I love to think that, surely, we are called as people of faith to view things quite the other way around! To know and to live the idea that in our hearts it is *always Christmas and never winter* !

*Always Christmas* because the incarnation is about LOVE being present with us – Emmanuel (literally, God with us) – love with us at all times and all places whatever happens to us, in the person of Christ, our light and life.. That as Christians, we know that to be true, not just at Christmas but at all times – and therefore it is *never winter* in our hearts, because we live carrying the Christian hope of the warmth of the knowledge of the fire of God’s love out into the world – taking all darkness and winter away.

“With many other exhortations, [John Baptist] proclaimed the Good News”.

How are we, as a Christian family today handmaids of the purposes of God’s love?

How are we, like John Baptist, proclaiming Good News?

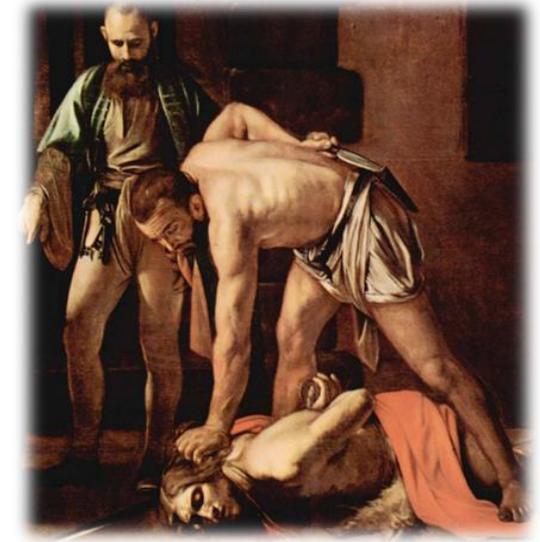
How do we, as a cathedral family and as individuals, bring sight to the blind and healing to a hurting world against the backdrop of the continued rise of extreme right-wing parties in this country and in Europe?

How do we challenge the *status quo* and bring good news to those trapped in poverty or oppression with the escalating rise of homelessness and poverty all around us?

How do we give new life to people who are broken-hearted as we see a rise in suicides reported, especially amongst the young, and by all accounts mental health budgets in the NHS being starved of money?

Are we rising to the challenge of being handmaids of the purposes of God’s love, helping bring in Christ’s values of mercy and peace, of justice and love?

Back to Caravaggio: please God, may we not be beheaded for being prophetic voices against governments in white houses and ivory towers, pointing the world to Christ. But, please God, may we be seen as people of holiness, people of Christ’s love and joy and peace: may we aspire to be handmaids of the Lord’s purposes of love.



“With many other exhortations, he proclaimed the Good News”.

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<sup>1</sup>The Nativity of John Baptist, Palazzo Barberini, Rome.

<sup>2</sup>Image: Caravaggio's Beheading of John the Baptist (detail), St. John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta [www.stjohnscocathedral.com](http://www.stjohnscocathedral.com)