

10 December 2023 – Human Rights Day

Today marks the 75th anniversary of one of the world's most groundbreaking global pledges: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris on 19 December 1948. This prophetic document enshrines the inalienable rights that everyone is entitled to as a human being - regardless of race, colour, religion, sex, language, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Sue Hammersley takes this as her theme for this second Sunday in Advent. Our Advent theme this year is prophets, and today we also recall John the Baptist's prophetic call.

Readings:

Isaiah 40:1-11. Mark 1:1-8.

Sermon: John the Baptist: a Prophet of a Better Way – Sue Hammersley

It's the second week of Advent and our readings talk about better times ahead. It's hard listening to readings which talk of the strength of Jerusalem at a time when the conflict between Israel and Gaza, the pain and violence being experienced by people across that region sends shockwaves throughout the whole world. This conflict has knocked so many others out of the headlines but war still causes hardship in Ukraine, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Somalia – to name but a few. Where there is war or terrorist uprisings there are humanitarian crises, People of all ages are killed, displaced, physically injured and mentally scarred.

It is 75 years since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was established to “infuse societies with equality, fundamental freedoms and justice.” It has given us a set of standards by which societies should live but it also shows us how far below this standard our world currently is.

Human Rights abuses are taking place right now in so many countries, not just those which reach the headlines but many places which are not in our daily news reports.

On this second Sunday of Advent we remember **John the Baptist**. John stood up against the powerful people of his time, the religious authorities and Herod the king. He preached repentance, a change of hearts and minds, to prepare us for the one who was to come. As people listened to him and accepted his challenge he baptised them as a powerful symbol of a better way of being.

John taught that judgement was close at hand. He proclaimed that we must share with those in need, eliminate greed and prohibit extortion. In Luke, chapter 3 we read that “Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and likewise anyone who has food; tax collectors were told not to collect any more than they were required to and soldiers not to extort money or accuse people falsely”.

I've said before that we need prophets, we need to listen to the voices of those who are crying out for a better way.

John knew that his wasn't the only voice; he knew that one much greater than him was coming – he believed that he was preparing the way for the one who would shine in the darkness...

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare His ways, to give knowledge of salvation to His people by the forgiveness of their sins. (Luke 1:76-78).

Each Sunday in Advent we sing a different version of the Benedictus, the song of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. If you remember, he was struck dumb when he was told that his wife, Elizabeth, would bear a son. The angel Gabriel told him that the child would ‘turn many of the people to God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord’. When the baby was born and brought to circumcision Zechariah was able to speak again and he confirmed Elizabeth’s statement that the child was to be called John. He proclaimed that God:

has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we... might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness all our days.

To us, gathered together today, we too are hearing the message of the angel and the prophecy of Zechariah, we hear them spoken to us, calling us to respond in our own lives, whether as a parent or a lover, as a teacher or a healer, an artist or a lawyer, we are all called to use our gifts to prepare the way for God’s kingdom of justice and peace in this generation.

John the Baptist’s call was to prepare the way and many of us don’t feel that we are being called to lead the people of God but we are all being called to encourage others, those we can see are living God’s kingdom values in their own lives. What we see in John the Baptist is someone who spoke out fearlessly against the corrupt values of the world he lived in.

Amnesty International works all year round to support those who are speaking out today against discrimination, injustice and human rights violations. After today’s service you can do one simple thing: you can sign the large card they have brought with them or you can write your own letter as part of their “Write for Rights” campaign. It might seem like such a small thing but we keep hearing what a difference it makes to someone who is in prison or whose freedoms have been curtailed because they have spoken up for a better way and are now paying the price. Perhaps we are not a campaigner, but we can do something to support those who are. Every time we call out wrongdoing, every time we witness to justice and truth in our world we prepare the way for God’s kingdom to come.

Today is the 75th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Human Rights. A declaration that speaks of a better way. You might like to read through those 30 Articles. They remind us how many people’s basic human rights are being undermined, even in this country.

For instance,

Article 14 states that: Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.

Article 20: that Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.

Article 23 that Everyone has the right to work, and, without any discrimination, everyone has the right to equal pay for equal work.

And **Article 25:** Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of themselves and their family...

John the Baptist was a prophet, speaking in the wilderness about a better way of being. He was not the light but he witnessed to the light, the light of life for all people. We may wonder what we can do, we may feel overwhelmed by the horrors of war and conflict but in this Advent season we too can testify that there is a better way.

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