

## ADVENT 2

### A SERMON PREACHED BY THE REV'D GLENN MAYTUM

In the Buckinghamshire U.K. village of Little Horwood sits a church built around 1200AD and dedicated to St Nicholas.

While it's not known how long there has been a church on the site, the village was given to the Abbey of St Alban's in 795 by King Offa and it is likely the first church was constructed soon after.

Rediscovered, after layers of post-Reformation limewash had been erased from the walls, are medieval wall-paintings of St Nicholas and St Thomas Beckett from the early 13<sup>th</sup> century.

Part of the minster of Winslow after the Dissolution of the Monasteries, the Lords of Little Horwood gifted the vicar ... *"the right to graze as many cattle and swine as he saw fit within the woods of the Chase"* (!). Probably a little tricky to do in Paddington- or even Chatswood *Chase!*

As I was reminded by email from one of our livestreaming congregation, today is St Nicholas' feast day. Happy St Nicholas' Day.

Nicholas was born in what is modern-day Turkey in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century. He became bishop of Myra and it is said he led the diocese with "clarity, dedication and respect for orthodoxy". He is known as the Patron Saint of Russia and of Greece and his relics are said to be buried in the Italian city of Baria. The legendary stories of Nicholas dressing in his red vestments and wearing a bishop's mitre and going about by night, leaving gifts for the poor; and gift giving to save children from slavery and prostitution, have given rise to the other bloke who wears red, a funny hat and who leaves gifts for children, by night: Santa (or "holy") Claus (short for "Niclaus");

And, children and those young-at-heart, look for him in Westfield or the QVB or, as we used to have in Coolamon each year, riding around town on the Fire Truck.

Everyone looks out for him. There is always great anticipation for families as their child sees Santa. And, Santa cries out "Ho, ho, ho" as he travels around town. For the secular world, he prepares us for the coming of Christmas. His presence says Christmas is near.

Now, in our Gospel reading today John the Baptist is not crying out "Ho, ho, ho", but a message of forgiveness and sacramental response.

Dressed somewhat differently to Santa (you probably would not have wanted to pop your pre-schooler on John's camel-hair-covered knee and he probably didn't smell too flash, either!

John proclaimed a message that the Kingdom of Heaven was near, so that all should repent and be baptized. And, it appears he was very effective in his message proclamation!

This time last year, I was visiting Singapore and on this Second Sunday of Advent, I went to church at St James', Leedon Road. I felt right at home- I was met by their Assistant Minister- Glenn (every St James' should have one!)

That day the Vicar spoke on Hope. How appropriate! We all certainly needed hope, this year!

And, that is what we see in John the Baptist's message- John pointed the way- he gave people hope. His message is both comforting and challenging. It assures us that the time is near for God to act on our behalf. God sends His Son.

The message that Matthew records warns us that a choice is required that will have consequences. Matthew's gospel reads that if "we bear fruit worthy of repentance," we can expect a reward. But, if we bear bad fruit we can expect to be "cut down and thrown onto the fire."

Ha! What an image that is!

The people of John's time certainly would have understood that image and I have seen this happen when I was in Griffith and, more especially McLaren Vale when, after harvest, the vines are pruned, a large bonfire is built and, when set alight, it burns like crazy! Very intimidating!

Very confronting as a Biblical image for us, though, as modern people.

But, we know God's justice is redemptive. Like John we are to be agents of hope- in season, like now in Advent, and out-of-season, as well.

Some years ago there was a "Peanuts" cartoon where Lucy is telling Charlie Brown, in Snoopy's presence, "You are going to reap just what you sow".

Surprised by this, Snoopy's response is... "I'd like to see a little more margin for error".

Advent reminds us making our paths straight; bearing good "fruit" by lives of service and dedication (like St Nicholas); preparing the way of the Lord in this world (like John the Baptist); are all parts of following Jesus.

John the Baptist pointed the way, but Jesus brings even better news! News that is appropriate for Advent! News that would cheer up even Snoopy!

There is, indeed, a margin for error. It is called **forgiveness**.