

St Brandon's 17 Dec Advent 3

Baptism of Annie and Elsie Webster

As the weeks of December fly by, we're getting closer and closer to Christmas, and there's growing expectancy and excitement. It won't be many more days until we sing 'Yea Lord we greet thee, born this happy morning...', until we welcome Jesus, long-expected and long-awaited.

In church, Advent is really important, all about watching and waiting. We have our Advent wreath with candles and special prayers – perhaps at home you have an advent candle or a calendar, with or without chocolate!

The watching and waiting in Advent are about tuning in to what Jesus' birth really means, not just the Christmas story but *why* he came to earth, and why this is such **Good News**.

In Greek, the language of the New Testament, the word Good News is 'gospel' – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all wrote different 'gospels', accounts of the Good News of Jesus coming. Today, Edward read from the first chapter of the gospel of John. If it sounded familiar, it's because it is part of what's often called the Christmas gospel, read in Carol Services and at Midnight Communion.

John doesn't tell the Christmas story of Mary, Joseph, angels and shepherds, but starts much further back. His opening words, which we didn't hear today, are:

In the beginning was the Word – who was God, in heaven.

The Word is John's name for Jesus and, as we heard, he also refers to Jesus as *the light, the true light which enlightens everyone*.

Today's reading focused on *a man sent from God whose name was (also) John* - the John we usually call John the Baptist. God sent John to prepare the way for Jesus, the Word, to bring **good news** from God. John's job was to get people ready to meet Jesus – and in Advent we always think about him. John was born just six months before Jesus, and his mother Elizabeth was Mary's cousin.

But our reading was about what John did once he grew up, when God sent him into the desert to pray and then to the River Jordan to preach and baptise people. As we'll see,

John's message wasn't easy, but it was **good news** from God and it conveyed urgency and excitement about Jesus, who was coming soon.

That air of urgency and excitement is brilliantly captured by CS Lewis in his classic children's book- as much for adults of course -*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

I expect many of you have read it, or seen the film.

'So come with me for a moment into Narnia, where it's always winter, because the white witch is in charge, always winter but never Christmas. But now, there are rumours that Aslan is on the move... that the evil witch's fearful reign won't last for ever...'

The children at the centre of the story have met Mr Beaver in the woods. He takes them home to his dam, where Mrs Beaver exclaims:

*'So you've come at last! At Last!
To think that I should ever see this day... '*

Mrs Beaver knows that once the 4 children are in Narnia, it will not be long before Aslan returns. They sit and talk with the beavers, who tell them about Aslan, the Lion who's the true King of Narnia...

They are fascinated, but slightly scared and they ask a very interesting question, *'But is he safe?'*

Mrs Beaver replies: *'Course he isn't safe. But he's good, I tell you.'* And later she says – *'He's not a TAME lion!'*

Aslan comes to defeat the power of the White Witch, not in the way anyone expected, but through dying on the stone table, and rising again, bursting his cords and breaking the table in two.

Aslan doesn't reach a diplomatic compromise with the white witch, or tell her to stop being nasty to people, instead, by giving his own life he defeats her power over the country of Narnia and then wins an epic battle and finishes her off.

He's not a tame lion! It is clear that Aslan represents Jesus.

And, like Mrs Beaver describing a not tame lion, John the Baptist's message is strong stuff.

John, like the prophets of God before him, doesn't pretend everything is fine, instead he tells people to repent, to prepare to meet the most powerful and wonderful human being ever to have lived on earth, the one who is God, the Messiah, Christ.

John the Baptist puzzled, then frustrated, then angered the religious leaders of the day, who thought they knew what to expect when the long-awaited Messiah came. And they wanted to know what he was doing, out there by the river, preaching a very different message from their neat and tidy religion, drawing crowds who were hungry to respond, be baptised and meet with God for themselves.

Like the prophets before him, John spoke of a God who isn't safe or tame, but is good. John preached that God's goodness offers forgiveness, for those who turn to him, admit their sin and then turn their lives around to match.

It's good news for everyone who responds and returns to God, who discovers just how much God loves them and that God gives them peace with him and eternal life.

It's also good news for those who are oppressed, poor, and weak, as they hear that God is on their side, as they experience the generosity and compassion of God's people, who have responded to his challenge to live for others, to break free of self-centred living.

And it's good news for the whole world, that God has not abandoned this creation but cares deeply for it and will one day bring judgement for everyone, judgement with truth and mercy. This means that evil will one day be defeated and justice will come. Good News.

Some say God isn't very nice to do this, but that's the point - John's message wasn't nice news, but good news. Strong stuff.

And Jesus didn't come to show us how to be nice to each other, but to break the very real power of evil in our lives and world – as the promises in the baptism service make clear too..

It is very special to baptise Annie and Elsie today, to remember John's message of good news, as he baptised people in the river Jordan. But John also said his baptism with water was just the beginning and that someone much more important was coming – Jesus.

We pray that, as Annie and Elsie grow up, they will understand the promises made for them today and the promise of God's love in their lives, but that too is just the beginning.

As they grow up, we hope and pray that they will get to know Jesus, who comes to us as the baby born in Bethlehem, but also as the true light from God, to enlighten our lives. At the end of the service, they will each receive a special candle, symbolising the light of Jesus for them as they grow up.

I want to close with a story about another John, John Wesley, who shared the good news of Jesus in his day, especially with the working people of England, many of whom turned to God, and established the Methodist church, which has been a huge force for good in our nation...

Like all children, John was hugely influenced by his parents - his mother would sit praying in their cottage, holding her apron over her face to create some quiet space for prayer – have you ever tried that one, Rebecca?

Susannah Wesley said this: There are two things to do about the gospel: believe it and behave it.

For Annie and Elsie as they grow up, we hope they will believe the good news of Jesus and behave it too, in the way they live their lives and the choices they make.

And it's for all of us, whatever our age, to believe and behave the gospel – the good news, and to share the love and light of Jesus Christ every day.

Then we will both discover and demonstrate what truly Good News it is.