

Manger Scene with John the Baptist
The Second Sunday of Advent
Eunice Koch – December 7, 2008

Isaiah 40:1-11

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

2 Peter 3:8-15a

Mark 1:1-8

Well, here we are again – celebrating -- Handel Sunday. Not handle, as in door handle or axe handle, but George Frederick Handel, of Messiah fame

The prophets of Israel were poets. There is a musical feel to many of the words. It is no wonder that many composers and librettists have, over the ages, recognized and used the words of the prophets in their works. Charles Jennen, Handel's librettist, chose the texts for Messiah very well, in my opinion. The lyric quality of the texts may have contributed to the speed in which the music was composed – 24 days!

Although it was written to be performed at Easter, we regularly hear Part 1 + Halleluiahs Chorus at Christmastime. And people very familiar with Messiah, hearing certain phrases, “hear” them in the rhythm of the music – “Comfort ye, comfort ye ee, my pe-e-ple”. Or somehow want to correct the lectionary; it is not “Every valley shall be lifted up” but “Every va-al-ee shall be ex-al-al-tered”. I watched some of you during the reading of the OT lesson and you were hearing the words in time to the music, too!

When people who are serious lovers of classical choral music hear verse 7: “The grass withers, the flower thereof falleth away...” they hear in their heads Brahms' setting of Isaiah's words in his German Requiem. The two compositions are quite different. Handel's setting of the words “Comfort ye, my people” is tender and lyrical, similar in feel to our opening hymn, number 67.

Brahms' setting of “the grass withers, the flower fades” is rugged and stern. (play a bit). Handel's music soothes us with its message of comfort; Brahms' music is a chilling but necessary reminder of our mortality. Yet there was

one inspiration for both composers: Isaiah's words spoken to Jewish exiles long ago in faraway Babylon.

When Cyrus, the ruler of the Persians, conquered the Babylonians he allowed the Jewish people to return to Jerusalem and Judea and resume their customs and traditions, provided that they recognized his authority. It is in this time period that the author of this section of the book of Isaiah wrote the words we heard today.

As we note in the gospel reading, Mark equates John the Baptist with the "messenger" in Isaiah. Now John is a really strange dude. When I think of John the Baptist, I recall the guy who showed up regularly on the corner of 16th & K Street in DC shouting, "Repent! and Prepare the way of the Lord!". He didn't care what people thought of him. He didn't care how he looked --- or smelled! His only concern was proclaiming the news.

John the Baptist was the same sort of character. He did his shouting in the wilderness of Judea. He wore funny clothes and ate food that he scavenged. No, John was not your average preacher, at least not by today's standards. He was not refined or dignified. If John were here today, would he preach in a nice church building and stand behind a nicely craved oak pulpit?

What if he had been on Sheridan Street in the middle of the holiday shopping crowd on Thanksgiving night as they got an early start on their Christmas shopping? What would the reaction be to his yelling about repentance? Most of the shoppers would probably have turned away, saying "there goes that grubby guy whose elevator doesn't go to the top floor." Some might even have called the police to have him taken away "for his own good!"

But John the Baptist is an important part of OUR preparation for the arrival of the Messiah. We usually think of LENT as the season for introspection, self examination, and repentance in preparation for Easter. Advent is a mini-Lent. The focus of Advent or the Coming of Jesus, should include anticipating His Second Advent, and the need to prepare ourselves for THAT coming. Advent reminds us that we, too, are exiles. The exiles in Babylon were looking forward and back - looking back to a time when they lived in their own land and looking forward to returning. We, too, are living

between times, looking back to God's coming among us as the babe in the manger and to his return "in power and great glory".

One of the charming historic crafts of Provence is santons. These started as creche figures, handmade, usually of terra-cotta, with brightly hand-painted features and colorful clothing..The word "santon" comes from the Provençal "santoun," or "little saint." They became popular during the French Revolution when the churches were closed and the large, traditional nativity scenes were prohibited. Smaller figurines began appearing in homes, and quickly gained popularity. (Show Louis, the wine maker santon)

Apart from the standard figures and animals associated with the nativity there are countless other santons depicting traditional characters from provencal village life, including the miller, the winemaker, the blind man, the dairymaid, the fishmonger's wife. And these routinely show up in the manger scene with the biblical characters and bring their offerings to the Holy Child.

I saw a santon nativity scene with John the Baptist. Not a young John as in the painting chosen by the Postal Service (show picture) - Botticelli's Virgin and Child with the Young John the Baptist. It was the adult John. He was garbed in his traditional coat of "camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist" in the field with the shepherds who were dressed as Provençal shepherds. Maybe, as a reminder of John's message, we ought to include a figure of John the Baptist in OUR manger scenes, --- mentally, if not physically. Hopefully, we would look at the scene and the season with different eyes.

"Joy to the world, the Lord is Come", "Repent! and Prepare the way of the Lord!", both appropriate responses to Luke's multitude of the heavenly host's saying "Glory to God in the highest."

AMEN