

THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME

A Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent, Dec 10, 2017

St. Paul's Cathedral, Kamloops BC

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During Bible Study this past week, I encouraged our custodian, Ron Sugiyama to start up a new church. He was admittedly puzzled by my request, but he was a good sport and we proceeded imaginatively. We considered first

- What will this new church would look like? Big, small, building, no building, loud, quiet and so forth
- We considered how this new church would differ from other churches, including St. Paul's
- We thought about customs, rituals and practices which would help this new community to find pride and definition in its new entity

To that end, and since Wednesday I have come up with other questions and suggestions. For instance

How must we dress – what shall we look like?

(dons a safety vest)

What can we eat – permissible/not allowed?

(shows a jar a Peanut Butter)

When we wait for life to move to the next level, what do we do together – what are our social rituals and communal disciplines

(Swimsuit for hot tub)

Our new church could be like the Qumran community of which I spoke a few weeks ago following our clergy conference. You may recall . . .

Qumran is the name given to the small settlement on a clay and limestone terrace above the northwest corner of the Dead Sea,

some 8.5 miles south of Jericho. In the Second Temple period, the site was occupied between 100 BC and AD 68, with a short break towards the end of the reign of Herod the Great. Most scholars are happy to say that those who inhabited the site were Essenes, a Jewish group in Palestine of about the same size and active at the same time as the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Turning to today's Gospel let's be clear, John the Baptist was not an Essene, but the group which gathered around him before and at the time when he met and baptized Jesus, shared some characteristics with the Qumran Community. Mark gives us John's story.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

Distinctive dress, dietary boundaries, special location, particular message, life-transformation, public curiosity, connection with tradition, disenchantment with authority, these are all ingredients in what church growth commentators would call a successful seeker church. It rivalled the early Jesus movement but in the end, disappeared with many other sects and cults of the day.

With John's story in mind, and with my fanciful scenario of the creation of another church in mind, and thinking about the community we cherish, St. Pauls Cathedral, I ask the same questions once more:

What do we do?

We are baptized; we change our way of life (repentance) and we speak Truth to ourselves (confess our sins) and to the world

Who are we?

We are those for whom the institutional church (the Temple in Jerusalem) has not been all that helpful on occasion (and I say this as part of the institutional church, which has not blessed me personally on many occasions)

How long must we wait together?

We wait for the one who will follow John, who we have not yet met, (at least as the lectionary allows) and for whom we wait.

Waiting is our natural posture

We may or may not follow John in strange attire, yet we find a way to make humility real in our lives. We pay attention to food and other ritual acts, which for the Christian means the bread and wine of Holy Thanksgiving/Eucharist. We initiate new members in Baptism (come back next week); we share sacred meals; we incorporate healing, reconciliation and other rites of passage into our life story.

John's community needed the wilderness for an encounter with God. I am not suggesting we re-locate to Knutsford or Lac du bois, though I do love it up there. They needed to live separately, even for a short time, in order to wait together, as do we in Advent season. Unlike the Essenes however, they returned to city and town. John exhibited ascetic practices in clothing, food and lifestyle. These will emerge more sharply next week in John's telling of the same baptizing story. And the rite of initiation was Baptism, eventually the baptism of Jesus but that comes later.

There are other communities, such as the community of Second Peter from which we can take our cue. Peter's community waited for the

imminent end of the world, wrongly as it turned out. They can teach us however something about waiting.

The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.

What sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God

Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

What can we take home from all this? I find strong hints about the shape of things to come from the communities of John and Second Peter, not only for my life personally, but for our life as a local faith community rooted in and proud of Anglican tradition, responding through hospitality to the changing life of a needy world, which with us can find joy, right here, right now. May the faithful waiting continue.