

COOKING OUR GOOSE (OR THE PLANET) – AN ADVENT WARNING!

PREACHER : Canon Neil Thompson, Precentor

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Advent 2

10.30am

Rochester Cathedral

Do you follow the recipe ...or do you just make things up as you cook?

And that question might well apply to more than cooking.

Some of us are rules people and like to conform strictly to procedures and practices whilst others are much more maverick: we do our own thing and enjoy being nonconformist and pragmatic.

Now most people are probably a mixture of the two but what about God and our view of him?

Does God have a recipe for his creation? – is it a fixed plan and how can he be free and God if he is limited by his own laws and plan of action?

These are big questions and part of the big themes that fill and dominate this season of Advent.

Here in our worship we are confronted by visions, promises and portents that are both terrifying and yet also part of the means of salvation and fulfilment.

People in our land would prefer to shop and plan for parties and time out.

Yet tomorrow sees the start of the Copenhagen summit conference on climate change and a global discussion on what can be done to avert catastrophe by a worldwide agreement on limiting our carbon dioxide emissions.

To this crisis we bring the sobering fact that there are many sceptics as to whether there is a crisis and a public that is unconvinced of the need for urgent action.

By a strange coincidence it echoes the Advent message and our inability to enter and engage with the challenging and difficult issues of God, our world and human existence.

The Bible is quite clear that time will come to an end and the Day of the Lord, the second coming, will be an overwhelming experience when all our control is eclipsed and all the power and securities that we have relied upon and even worshipped will fail and disintegrate.

The reading from Malachi sees this coming of God as refining fire and fuller's soap - burning and cleaning away all that alienates us from God.

For St Paul in addressing the church at Philippi he looks forward to the day of Christ which puts everything into a proper perspective.

And furthermore for Christians the day of Christ is an event which has already begun in Jesus' birth, death, resurrection and ascension.

And for this great event spanning immense tracts of time, there is a parallel process of preparation.

This morning we hear this cry in the words of John the Baptist:

Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

So is this some kind of recipe and plan that God gives to his people?

What sort of Christmas would we have if John the Baptist was in charge?

If John the Baptist turned up on your doorstep offering to help you get ready for Christmas what would you give him to do?

...and what might he offer to do?!!

His imagery seems more to do with earthmoving rather than house decorating, shopping and cooking!

Yes, here in church we listen to the scriptures as we prepare for our annual celebration of Jesus' birth – but do we take any notice of what they mean and what they say?

I have to confess that as we burrow into schmaltz and sentiment, consumer frenzy, party time and self-indulgence, the Church's message is not a very marketable one!

So is the Gospel as fragile as the very natural world in which we live?

In one sense the answer is most definitely yes, and as a result we have to live with a provisionality based on the truth that nothing as we know it will remain.

Nothing.

And so all our plans will come to nought.

There are many recipes and proposals in the world but it is God alone who can save, deliver and redeem.

Which brings me back to my opening question: do you and I follow the recipe?

And does God have a recipe or provide one for us?

The answer I believe is yes but in a rather distinctive way.

And for this I am going to adopt culinary images!

In your kitchen, do you have a much-thumbed Christmas cookbook?

There has certainly been an explosion of cookbooks over the past 20 years or so.

And different cooks countdown to different kinds of Christmas:

There's...

Delia Smith – practical, failsafe and dependable (we've got her!)

Jamie Oliver – folksy, laddish and yet strangely accomplished

Nigella Lawson – voluptuous and indulgent (my favourite !!!)

Gordon Ramsay – professional and challenging

Heston Blumenthal – surreal, psychedelic and experimental

Anthony Worrall Thompson – laid back, easy and affable.

And this makes we wonder if the spiritual life might also have similar categories and approaches!

Perhaps this is how we pray and do our theology, make ourselves God's people and become church.

Perhaps, too, it is how we do our politics and approach the great issues of our age.

And John the Baptist's message is not so much a recipe but the utter vulnerability of faith ...in fact it may well feel like a recipe for disaster.

So getting ready for Jesus – his birth two thousand years ago, his birthday in 2009 or his coming at the end of time – no matter which, we have to throw away our preconceived ideas and comfortable preferences to live a different way.

And that might also have a cooking image: I remember there was a programme called *Ready, Steady, Cook!* It may still run on television.

The essence of the programme was that two celebrity guests would bring along a handful of cooking ingredients amounting to £4 or £5 in value and then two accomplished cooks with the celebrities' help as sous-chefs would produce a multi course meal in 20 minutes or so.

There were no recipe books – just a medley of ingredients bought at whim and assembled into the finest meal possible in a ridiculously short amount of time.

There is Advent in a nutshell.

There, too, lie our human lives and the limited and diminishing resources of our beautiful and possibly stricken world.

And there, is how we might approach our life of prayer: simply, with what we have and with a clear acceptance of the finite nature of our lives and the reality and purpose of death and indeed judgement.

Yes, there was a winner on *Ready Steady Cook!!!!* ...and he or she was decided by the audience.

In prayer, in Advent and in our politics, there is no audience, only participants and the judge is God, the God who is love and before whom we kneel in a few days at a manger crib.

There in Bethlehem, and then in Nazareth and Jerusalem, God in Jesus had limited ingredients, no recipe and a tight time limit, just like you and me.

So back to Rochester and Copenhagen, our homes and Afghanistan and Zimbabwe: John the Baptist and the prophets are right - there is much earth moving to do and it may involve cataclysmic reorganisation.

We, who have so much, may not choose it voluntarily, but most of our planet's population has to live a hair shirt lifestyle just like John the Baptist – and daily millions of people eat only bush tucker trial ingredients.

Tomorrow at Copenhagen, our politicians have to grow up and accept that it is alright and indeed even better to live simply, generously and responsibly. Whether, the climate is changing or not because of our greedy, polluting and exploitative behaviour, we are certainly following the wrong recipes.

May we have the courage to throw away our preferences for doing it, my way or even our way, and learn to live God's way.

Take our world of sense and substance,
Make what's passing, yours for aye.
Reach us, closing every distance
With the mystery of your way.

Starlit darkness, Christ in glory,
Help us find that way today:
Hidden truth and inner story –
Spirit's life in pots of clay.

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Amen.