There are two key themes for us to focus on today, as we think about the call John the Baptist placed on the lives of those who came out to hear him and to be baptised by him in the wilderness by the Jordan, a call he places on us today as well.

One is the idea of coming home, of being home, with all the sense of safety that that entails. Home is where we were made to be. Home is peace and family and ease and rest. (Of course, tragically, for many people it doesn’t feel like that but we are dealing with the concept and ideal of home here). Home is where we are meant to be, where we find ourselves, and that is where John calls us.

The second is that John calls us to build home by completing our baptism through the way we live. He tells his hearers that it’s not enough for them to have slithered out to him from the city like a brood of vipers- it does not end there- they have to live as people who have been baptised. Theologically baptism is complete in and of itself, of course, because it is God’s free expression of love for us- but the seed which has been planted is meant to bear fruit in the way we live. In the same way, we are Eucharistic people. The Eucharist is complete and in and of itself and it is not dependent on anything we do outside this service- but how disappointing would it be if nothing changed because we’d been here, gathered as one, seen Christ in each other, shared one bread, known how precious we are to God, known accepting love and then we go out into the world and… nothing changes.

John wants those he baptises in the River Jordan to complete their baptism by the way they live. We are children of the Eucharist and experiencing all of this, knowing how precious we are to God, how much our life and our possibility change because of what God does for us, must mean that life is different- what we value, what we attempt, how we approach people and decisions, what we dream of, what we do, everything must be different because of what the Eucharist and baptism tell us of who we are because of who God is.

Which is to say, we must complete our baptism and this feast by living- and that is coming home, coming home to God, making our world the home God longs for it to be once more.

Which is possibly the longest introduction I have ever written for a sermon, but it helps to lay out the themes we are gifted in today’s readings.

We rarely read Zephaniah because it is a broadly depressing read and a book which has a very contested history. There’s no agreement on when it was written or how heavily it’s since been edited- and it’s depressing because the prophet keeps calling the whole nation to repent and they do not. The last verses, which we have just heard, mark a clear change of tone and message, as if a bit of Isaiah had drifted away and got tacked onto the end. These verses are about home- about a nation coming home, about God making a home with them, about home being the place where God’s longings and love become our longings and our love. Which you could say in this season of Advent is a decent description of Bethlehem and the stable.

John is a deceptive voice- the style of his delivery and the content of his message do not entirely gel together. We often think of him as being an entirely Old Testament figure who has drifted from the desert into the pages of the Gospels in error. He lives in the wilderness far from society and far from others, he wears animal fur and eats the food he forages, he calls those who have travelled long miles to see him a brood of vipers. So far, so Old Testament.

But there is more subtlety and compassion in John than that introduction would suggest. Remember that he leapt in Elizabeth’s womb when Mary came to call. He is a prophet, yes, but he is preparing the way for the new action of God, for a new campaign, for the coming Messiah whose shoes he is not worthy to untie. He looks like an extremist but what he says is reasonable, balanced, just. The cover might scream Old Testament but the content, the message, the Good News is a golden thread straight from the prophetic tradition- that acceptance and mercy, and grace and forgiveness which Jesus makes flesh.

John tells those who come to him to complete their baptism by the way they live. He calls them individually to lives of repentance and love- not as a nation, but as precious individual souls called to build a home and called to be together. He calls them to community and justice and mutual flourishing and interdependence.

He is playing one tune from the great symphony of Old Testament prophecy with verve and passion- mercy, grace, community, neighbouring, life, home.

If you have two shirts and someone else has none, share.

If you’re a tax collector, keep on being a tax collector- but be an honest one.

If you’re a soldier, don’t abuse your position and terrify people just because you can- uphold the law, obey orders, don’t be a bully.

John is not calling for a revolution- he is calling people to make the leanings and longings of God’s heart their own, to complete their baptism, to build a home. There is something profound and profoundly beautiful in the way God is doing something new in Jesus, and using the chief means of communication from the Old Testament to do it. Jesus is a bold and fresh expression of the unchanging and unchangeable love of God. It feels poetic and right that God would use such a traditional means of preparing the way for that new adventure as John the Baptist, the last of the great prophets of our Old Testament and the first of the great disciples of the New.

John draws the eyes of the nation to himself by his manner of dress and style of speech. They think they know what to expect. They are used to being called vipers. But then John seizes their attention and starts to play with it- he is not calling for great national transformation or penitence, or talking about Roman occupation or class war. He says build a home on God’s love and longing for everyone to be welcome. He tells them to care for their neighbour. He tells them to just do their job. He tells them to wait for the one who is coming after him. And then, poof, he is gone, his work finished, his job done, wondering away into the desert, leaving the stage set and the crowd hungry.

And as he goes he whistles a tune, a tune which lingers on the air, one those who have gathered to hear him find that they have heard before, long ago, which echoes in their hearts and finds a home there- a tune which speaks of God’s love and forgiveness, and mercy and grace and passion, a tune which speaks of hope and beauty and light and joy.

And as the tune fades, listen, another voice is coming, whistling the same tune, picking it up without pause. The tune rises. It attracts and compels and causes the heart, your heart, to dance. One is coming who is greater than John, carrying the same tune. And you can’t wait to see him.