Well, we’re back! Surrounded by the familiar, but also overlayed by the very unfamiliar! Above that forest, which apparently is called a bird cage is a false floor to enable builders to repair the plaster ceiling. And it’s rather fun to wander around up there, touching the top of the ceiling, normally inaccessible except to errant pigeons. It’s also very sobering to see the massive crack running through it. You really see this building in a new way.

It’s been an interesting time for us as a church, worshipping in the school hall. Some have liked it, some have not. Maybe being in a smaller space made us feel a little closer to each other and indeed to the market community. We are returning to better acoustics and more beauty to the eye. And we have escaped the distracting scent of sizzling sausages during our worship. But it is good to have experienced our worship differently, with a new perspective.

Advent is a good time for taking a step back and looking at things in a new way. And that’s what John the Baptist did. He stood back from the market place and the temple. He went out into the desert and took a long hard look at how things were back in town. And he got angry. Really angry. You wouldn’t want to follow John the Baptist’s advice on how to win friends and influence people. But for some reason people flocked out to hear him. The way John saw things and spoke, was what the prophets before him had spoken in their time. This was what they all said. Put things right with God. Shake up your complacent religion. Be real, seek integrity rather than putting on a show. What everyone needs to do, said John, is repent. Have a review of how things are going and what might need changing. It doesn’t mean feeling guilty or hating yourself for things you have done wrong.
This is what St Paul says about it in 2 Corinthians 7:10. Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. Repentance isn’t about beating yourself up, but about being transformed. The Greek translation of repentance is Metanoia – changing how you think and act.

I wonder what John the Baptist would be angry about today. There’s an awful lot to be angry about.

Poverty and homelessness, corruption, selfishness, slavery, the creeping secularisation, consumerism and amorality that threatens the spiritual heart of our nation. Addictions that enslave people and crush their humanity.

The thing that has been foremost in my mind this week is little Arthur Labinjo Hughes, tortured and starved to death by his parents. Seeing film of him crying ‘nobody loves me’ ‘nobody will feed me’. May he now be in the embrace of Jesus, at the most wonderful banquet in heaven. Amen. Our society does indeed need repentance, metanoia, transformation.

There was also something else notable about John the Baptist. He was part of something far greater than himself. His role was limited. He recognised that he was called to prepare the way, and that he would decrease while one greater than him would increase. He was laying foundations for another to build on.

That in a way is what is happening to this building. Thanks to Fr Stephen’s blood, sweat and tears, restoration for the next several generations to worship in is well under way. For the grandchildren of our young church children. Advent reminds us that the Kingdom is greater than us, that our contribution is important, but that we are part of a movement towards the end of all things that is greater than our individual place in it. That gives us a perspective, a way of looking at things, that can be both sobering and comforting. We are called to be transformed in the coming of God’s kingdom. But that process only just begins in this life.

This is a rather helpful reflection attributed to Oscar Romero, a prophetic priest and martyr like John the Baptist.

It helps, now and then, to step back and take the long view. The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts; it is even beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God’s work.
Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession brings perfection. No pastoral visit brings wholeness. No program accomplishes the church’s mission. No set of goals and objectives includes everything. This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water the seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities. We cannot do everything and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something and to do it well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord’s grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.

Lord, this Advent, give us godly repentance and transformation. Give us perspective; the long view. You call us to ventures of which we cannot see the ending and by paths as yet untrodden. Give us faith to go out always with good courage, knowing that in the power of your Holy Spirit we are made strong and that your love will never fail us.