

ADVENT 2

At the beginning of a new church year we prepare for the coming of Jesus: as a helpless baby, born in abject circumstances to a poor family living in a tiny country ruled as a minor part of the great Roman Empire. Those humble beginnings presaged a revolutionary message which went on to overturn many of the fundamental assumptions on the relationship between man and God, which had developed over many centuries of human history.

The church Lectionary, which orders our readings through the Christian year, takes us logically through this 'thought revolution', linking older prophecies with new truths - building the story of Jesus from his conception, through birth, childhood, initial ministry, death, resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit. This in turn led to previously unknown men and women spreading the 'Good News' of Jesus Christ to the whole world - and to each one of us today.

The second and third weeks of the Advent season invite us to consider John the Baptist and his relationship with Jesus. John appears in the tradition of the great prophets of old, preaching repentance and reform to the people of Israel, preparing the way for God's salvation. All three Synoptic gospels attest to the importance of John in preparing for the coming of Jesus. Only Luke, however, extends the connection between these two men back to their birth. The first two chapters of Luke's gospel contain the 'infancy narrative' which tells of the the birth of both John and Jesus, the early relationship between their two families - and sets the scene for the beginning of Jesus' ministry in chapter three.

Luke was also the author of the Acts of the Apostles, which continued the story beyond Jesus' death and resurrection to the history of the early church. Taken together, Luke's sense of time and history emerges, He identifies three epochs of salvation history - the time before Christ, the time of Christ and the time of the Holy Spirit guiding the young church. In chapter three of his gospel, John the Baptist is presented as the figure who bridges the time before Christ and prepares the way for Christ's own ministry.

Around this time of year (December), we begin to hear from almost everyone we meet and speak to - 'Are you ready for Christmas?' Sadly, nowadays, for most people, that means little more than 'Have you done your Christmas shopping?' Or 'Have you ordered your turkey?'. Christmas means very different things to different people. For many there is anticipation and excitement about family reunions, feasting, parties, gifts and time off work. For some it can also be a time of sadness or grief - whether for some lost loved one, or because of loneliness which seems particularly poignant at this time of year.

For the church, however, the question is not 'Are you ready for Christmas?' But, 'Are you ready for Christ?' John the Baptist - the voice of 'one crying in the wilderness' does not speak of a particular day. Instead he preaches of a particular way - the 'way of the Lord'. He doesn't speak about getting things ready. Instead he speaks about getting ourselves ready. While the world announces preparations for a holiday, John announces preparation for a way of life.

This is a message of hope and promise, but it is also a highly disruptive message. It disrupts the patterns and habits of our life within our family, our social circumstances, in

fact, in everything we do. The Word of God comes in every time, place and circumstance, offering a new way, a new life, a new world. John points to that coming by proclaiming a baptism of repentance, echoing the prophet Isaiah. 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled: every mountain and hill made low: and the crooked shall be made straight and rough ways made smooth.'

This passage is not simply a description of the geography of the wilderness. It is, rather, a description of our inner landscape. With prophetic insight these words describe our experience of life. Each of us can recall the ups and downs, the highs and lows, the mountains and the valleys of our life. We can recount the crooked paths on which we got lost: the rough ways where we stumbled. The prophecy foresees how things can be different.

Repentance is the movement from what is, to what might be. It is how we prepare for the 'way of the Lord'. We repent not because we are bad or defective, but because we are loved by God. God's love and desire for us form the basis of every call for repentance. It is about turning our life around, in a new direction. It means a change of mind and heart. It begins with examining our own lives: discovering the patterns that blind us to who God is, and who our neighbours really are. Things like anger, fear, greed, the need for approval, being judgemental - all of these things and many more distort our reality.

We are asked, then, to turn away from these ways of ours and create new habits of thinking, speaking, relating to others, acting - in order to recognise the divine presence in every individual. This time of Advent is designed to set us on the road to doing just that.

Repentance is not just about 'getting to Christmas'. It becomes a way of life, a way of being. It doesn't end on twelfth night: it ends with the fulfilment of a promise made in Luke 3, verse 6, 'that all flesh shall see the salvation of God'.

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