

Second Sunday in Advent

It was of John that the prophet Isaiah had spoken when he said: “A voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.’” Matthew 3, 1-12

In these few weeks before Christmas, many of us send Christmas cards to friends and relatives, many of whom we make contact with only at this time each year. Could you imagine sending off a card that had on it a line drawing of John the Baptist accompanied by the words from today’s gospel reading: *“Brood of vipers, who warned you to fly from the retribution that is coming?...Even now, the axe is being laid to the roots of the trees, so that any tree that fails to produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown on the fire.”* Of course, the card would also carry a handwritten note like: “Trust all the family is well. Best wishes for a happy and holy Christmas.”



While most of us would agree that John the Baptist is hardly a Christmas figure, we cannot escape the fact that Matthew, Mark and Luke all place him at the very start of the Christmas story, thereby saying very clearly to us that the only route to the joy surrounding the birth of Jesus is through an encounter with the Baptist at the Jordan.

Just imagine yourself turning up to mass next Saturday evening or Sunday morning and being greeted at the church door by a visiting priest who yells at you: “Brood, of vipers, what are you doing here?” Yet that seems to be the kind of reception the Baptist extended to the Pharisees and Sadducees who were, no doubt, regular attendees at the local synagogue.

If the Baptist were to appear in our local parish next weekend, he’d be in our faces, confronting us with something like: “Don’t tell me you’re of one mind with the Pope and that you’re here every Sunday and that you give to the ‘Retired Priests’ Appeal’ and are a member of the St. Vincent de Paul Society. Repent! And stop making excuses for yourself. Stop pretending, and admit to all your little addictions and petty behaviour.”

There’s nothing particularly attractive about John the Baptist. He’s an eccentric, “in your face”, nagging desert-dweller who looks as though he’s never washed in his life. But he won’t get out of the way as he pesters all of us to summon up the courage to say (at least to ourselves): “Good evening, I’m Alan and I’m an alcoholic.” or “My name’s Sandra and I’ve been cooking the books.” or “I’m Alex and I’m ashamed to say I can never bring myself to say anything good about anybody.”

In his revival meetings by the Jordan, John makes it clear that he is calling people to repent in preparation for the coming of one greater than himself who will usher in the Kingdom of God. John’s call is to action, to produce the goods, to demonstrate that we have left behind compromise and excuses. All this fits perfectly with Matthew’s Jesus who is big on getting results. One of the key themes of Matthew’s theology is an emphasis on observing the commandments of Jesus. So, when John gets to the point of describing Jesus, he tells us that Jesus will require us to be intensely active for good. John’s message is: Perform or perish.

Like many of the prophets, John conveyed his message through exaggeration. And the intensity of his message is tempered by the other two readings for today's liturgy from Romans and Isaiah. While John talks of axes being taken to unproductive trees, Paul, in the reading from Romans, talks of God as "the source of patience and encouragement who helps us when we refuse to give up." (Romans, 15, 5) Moreover, God does not expect us to produce anything without first offering a vision. Today's first reading from Isaiah sets out a programme for world rehabilitation under the guidance of a leader who operates out of wisdom and integrity. That same vision is central to the Gospel. Jesus makes no call on us without first offering us an exciting vision of better times. We can take comfort from this, knowing that anyone who, in the name of religion, calls us to action is twisting the Gospel if he or she offers no accompanying vision.

There is one final thing to remember about the fiery prophet of today's gospel reading. Within a fairly short time of his preaching at the Jordan, John was arrested on trumped-up charges and imprisoned. As he languished there, doubts and uncertainty plagued him. He questioned whether his judgement about Jesus being the Messiah was correct. Accordingly, he sent some of his disciples to ask Jesus whether he was for real: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (Matthew 11, 3) Jesus responded in the best way possible: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news brought to them, and happy is the man who does not lose faith in me." (Matthew 11, 4-5)

None of us is free of doubts and second thoughts especially when the going gets tough. John wondered whether he had bet on the right Messiah in championing his own cousin. Jesus, too, as he hung dying on the Cross, questioned whether he had been abandoned by God. It is, therefore, not surprising that we, too, waver under pressure. We can surely take comfort from the fact that we are in the very best of company.

But John's challenge still stands. No matter who we are, there is always scope for improvement. Only when we recognize that and warm to the challenge will we be active partners in building the reign of God.