

Advent II Year B - 2023

Advent is never complete without hearing about the great prophetic figure, John the Baptist. The Scripture readings for this Second Sunday of Advent and also next week, focus on this last prophet of Israel, and his summons to repentance given the coming of the Lord. All four evangelists witness the truth that you cannot tell the story of Jesus without first speaking about Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist.

John of course, is mentioned only in the Gospels but the lectionary provides the context for his preaching by choosing the first reading from Isaiah (40: 1-11) indicating his role in the history of salvation; *"A voice that cries in the wilderness, Prepare a way for the Lord"*. *John the Baptist could be understood as an icon or a symbol of the preparation necessary to encounter Christ. As we know he spent most of his days in the wilderness in solitude and prayer, searching for the Messiah, preparing his heart and soul. This is why he was later able to point people toward the Messiah, saying "Behold the Lamb of God"*.

We could argue John is the original desert father who found Christ and his Gospel. John and all who followed him to the desert throughout the centuries have much to teach us, Christians in 21st-century Western society. In particular, the need for the desert for our faith and the importance of continuous repentance, and being baptized in the Holy Spirit.

In his poem *St John Baptist*, Sidney Keyes catches something of the place of John in sacred history.

I, John, not reed but root;
Not vested priest nor saviour but a voice
Crying daylong like a cricket in the heat,
Demand your worship. Not for me
But for the traveller, I am calling
From beyond Jordan and the limestone hills,
Whose runner and rude servant I am only.
Not man entirely but God's watchman,
I dwell among the blistered rocks
Awaiting the wide dawn, the wonder
Of his first coming, and the Dove's descent.

John the Baptist teaches us the wisdom of the desert, the value of silence, reflection, and detachment from earthly preoccupations that keep us in a constant state of business. We are all so busy with hundreds of things to do; that the to-do list never seems to end. It is good to remind ourselves we are called human beings and not human doings; and relearn to BE and not just to DO. As Psalm 46 says "Be still and know I am God". During this Advent each of us needs to find our desert to be with God, to be in silence listening to his voice, reflecting on his word, and removing ourselves from the constant business of life.

Most of us are familiar with one of the most dramatic discoveries of our era. In 1947, a little Bedouin shepherd boy stumbled on some hidden caves surrounding Qumran, an outpost in the Judean desert. In these caves, he found jars in which there were scrolls. They turned out to be the famous Dead Sea Scrolls, which gave the world copies of most of the Hebrew Scriptures. The find included a complete scroll of Isaiah from the early part of the first century before Christ, making it the oldest copy of Isaiah ever found.

The scrolls eventually revealed the existence of a sect called the Essenes who had left Jerusalem, the Temple and civilization behind to go into the desert to await a deliverer and get things straight in their lives. They went to the desert because that is where religion began. They went back to the source, as it were. After all, it was in the desert that God appeared to Moses and gave him the Law. It was in the desert that a small nomadic tribe, with no resources other than what God provided – manna and quail- not only survived but flourished and passed on its revelation and experience to the world. It was in the vast loneliness of the desert that the people of God were originally forged.

Therefore, the 'desert experience' has come to mean going back to the basics, back to the source, back to utter dependency on God, *going back to reclaim one's true identity as a beloved child of God rather than the celebrity image forced on us by the media that sees us as a consuming fire endlessly stoked by endless products!* Desert experience means that we must pull away to gain perspective. While Advent does not have the penitence of Lent, there is certainly the call to repent, turn back, pray, await, and prepare, symbolized by the same liturgical colour of Lent – purple.

It is not a surprise then, that in today's Gospel, John the Baptist was found in the desert and not in the city. Later on in Christian history, when cities became corrupt and distracted, a whole group went to the desert – the Desert Fathers, we call them and found monasteries as havens of renewal and spiritual refreshment. People would flock to the monasteries like the crowds flocked to the desert to see John the Baptist and sit at the feet of the holy desert monk called the 'abba' – Abbot. The common refrain was, *'Speak a word, Father, that we might live'* – so they did. Their words to the point, were, like those of John the Baptist, totally uncompromising, when it came to seeking holiness.

The Desert Fathers, like John, appeared eccentric at times. But there was a deep sense of purpose in what they did. If, for example, they went without sleep, it was because, Advent-like, they were watching for the Lord. If they did not speak often, it was because they were listening to God. If they fasted, it was because they were fed by God's word and the Eucharist. It was God that mattered to them and their asceticism was only a means to that end. Do we thirst for God and his Spirit bad enough to do any of these spiritual practices? The point of today's Gospel, the point of the wisdom of the desert fathers, is that if we need renewal and refreshment in our faith, if we want to rise above the humdrum consumer living and become a real person of depth and Spirit, we must go back to the source. We must go to the desert.

Some take it literally, and they go to a monastery. Others go on a retreat or to a day of recollection. For others, it is the daily prayer times, spiritual reading, or listening to spiritual content. For all of us, going to the desert means giving up time and making space for God and his Word. As I have been saying this desert experience is at the heart of religion. Unless we enter into a desert experience ourselves we will not see the need to repent; and we will not see Christ when he

comes, neither we will be able to live our Baptism to the full, since we will not be baptized/immersed in his Spirit in an ongoing way.

John the Baptist has many things to teach us: such as his courage, speaking the truth boldly, humility, sanctity, simplicity, authentic desire for God, leading people to Christ so on and so forth. All these were the fruit of his time in the desert. So let us sit at the feet of the Lord in a 'deserted place' in the silence and wait to hear a life giving Word so that we too can truly repent, encounter Christ and be Immersed in his Holy Spirit this Christmas.