

Sermon Advent 2 Year B 2017

Well, it's now 14 days until Christmas, and there will be no escaping our culture trying to convince us that the season is really about indulging ourselves in food, drink, and whatever else money can buy. And, if you haven't felt it already, we will all face temptations to live the next couple of weeks as though there were no higher purpose to our lives than to find pleasure in in food, drink, and whatever else money can buy. Now of course, enjoying a celebratory feast *is* a good thing. Every culture of every place and probably every age has celebrated its important days with a generous meal with special food and lots of it. Sociologists might say that that it is a defining mark of human culture. And so, it is good that on *our* special day we share this with the wider human family.

But of course, there is issue if our feasting and pleasure in material goods become ends in themselves; if our only concern is to eat, drink, and enjoy ourselves - simply celebrating the celebration. Even for faithful, well-meaning Christians, there is great temptation in the coming weeks to ignore the spiritual gravity of the birth of our Saviour for the sake of the annual round of parties, presents, and other earthly cares associated with the holiday season. If a good Christmas is defined for us simply by the quality of our food and drink, our presents, and our reunion with family members, then we are fools in the sense of thinking that the passing pleasures of this life are more real, more important, and ultimately more satisfying than the salvation brought to the world by the incarnation of the Son of God.

Food, fellowship, and a desire to give to others is not, of course, wrong in and of themselves; they are certainly God's good gifts. The problem is that, due to our spiritual weakness, we so easily make them idols instead of remembering that they are blessings to be received and to be offered back to God. Our challenge - as faithful believers - is to keep them *in their proper place* as signs of our joy at the birth of the Lord; they themselves are not the reason for our celebration. But how easy it is to become distracted by self-indulgence; distracted by pleasure; distracted by earthly cares; distractions that will weaken our hearts and souls. But all this just shows how easily we forget - neglect - our true origin and destiny. How easily we settle for an *imitation* of human life.

How important, then, that on this second Sunday of Advent, the church places before us the disconcerting and strange figure of John the Baptist. We look to the Baptist and we see someone completely out of step, completely out of whack with the dominant direction our culture pushes us toward at this time. We could almost see him as the perennial party pooper! But this strange figure in the wilderness is so important because he calls us - points us - to someone else, something more... How important, then, that the *very first words* spoken by *any* character in any Gospel (remember, Mark is the first, the earliest, of the gospels to be written), are, '*The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.*' How important it is that these first words are the first uttered in the Gospel! And this, in the very first words *written* of this first Gospel, is *Good News: The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ the Son of God.*

The Gospel writer Mark (who we now follow for the coming year), here expresses a fundamental insight, an insight that must be true for us, if we wish to be truly faithful to the Gospel: we must give way, we must step aside, we too are unworthy. And that to receive this Good News - to accept it, to understand it - we must *repent*, we must reorient our lives, we must turn to the Lord. We can only receive the Good News when we recognise our need of this saving presence, to stop looking at ourselves, relying on ourselves, and look to what God is offering.

That's where we become so out of step with our age, our culture. It has abandoned God. It has no need of him. Replaced instead with a bold, self-confident assertion that we can be whatever we want to be, do whatever we want to do, that we can achieve anything, go anywhere, have anything. It's a fantasy of course. In fact, a gross deception. But one the entire advertising industry is based on, and even now entire education systems: there are no limits, you can be and do anything. Except of course for this little thing called human nature which keeps on getting in the way... Despite our advances, our progress our boundless optimism in human capacity, we mess up and hurt ourselves and each other and mostly we end up not getting very far at all. And we can hear John the Baptist say of course! Look to ourselves we will only be disappointed! Trust in ourselves, we really don't get very far. Having displaced God is our culture any better. Rather, we might say, more ugly and lacking beauty, vulgar, crass, confused and aimless.

As the Gospel writer John tells the story, the Baptist on the banks of the Jordan says, *'Behold, there is the Lamb of God.* So many artists down the ages depict John pointing: *there.... Behold...* That really is the icon of the remedy to the human condition: don't point to yourself! Now, John had the singular vocation of preparing the way. A voice crying in the wilderness, *prepare the way of the lord. Make straight his paths.* He didn't ask what was in it for him, how this would fit into his life plans, or whether he could count on financial support. He didn't think of his life in terms of acquiring enough possessions to enable him to eat, drink, and be merry. Instead: there, behold - *The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.'* We can barely imagine such self-effacing humility: an entire life geared toward something and someone totally other. Yet if Christian life is anything it is that - a life geared toward Something and Someone totally other.

Today we welcome Hunter and his family as he is made one with Christ and his Church through holy baptism. Already I am sure his parents are planning his first Christmas. Perhaps already grandparents and godparents will be looking to buy his first Christmas gift; his parents looking toward all the good things that he might enjoy with his brother. But don't forget the greatest gift you can bestow on this child: to encourage and impart on him the gift of faith. Like all the important things in life - the things we value the most - it oughtn't be left to chance, or the misguided idea, *he can make his own mind up when he's older.* You won't say that about his health or his schooling or many other activities, *he can make his own mind up about that....* The most important for the little boy in your charge is to direct, to orient his life to God, to encourage him to live the life for others, indeed *the Other.* The best of his life will be that which is oriented toward God.

Of course, what is say to them I say to you all, I say to myself: we must make room for God, we must orient our lives to God. Look simply to ourselves, to gratifying ourselves and our desires, we'll only end up with a half-life. It is easy to bemoan the crass vulgarities that dominate the culture at this time. But then we had better be sure the spiritual alternative is firmly in place in *our* lives. We can. Like John the Baptist we must look beyond ourselves, turning to Christ, pointing Christ. In that we will find our true happiness, our deepest and most true fulfilment. Amen.