

Sermon Advent 2 Year C 2024

Perhaps it is this time of year more than at any other time of year, we notice the discord between the ideal – how things ‘should be’ - and their reality. Santa Claus ‘should be’ a celebrated as a 4th century bishop. The reality is that he has become a consumerist gimmick dressed in the colours of coca cola. The ideal is that Christmas is a feast that lasts for 12 days (yes, the ‘12 days of Christmas’ we sing about) ending at Epiphany, with the coming of the wise men on January 6. The reality is that as soon as 25th December is over people think about packing up the decorations. The ideal is that Christmas should be a time of peace. The reality is that all too often it is people getting stressed out of their brains wondering what to buy for whom. It’s supposed to be about love. The reality is that so often it is dominated by family tensions. Christmas is supposed to be about joy. The reality is that so often joy is swamped by the stress of keeping everyone else happy....

Something of the dissonance between ideal and reality emerges when we consider the Scriptures the church places before us in this season. We *think* that Advent is just about the babe of Bethlehem and all those nice, reassuring bits about religion. But the church won’t let us get there just yet! Last week we had Jesus give a stern warning to watch, to wait, to stay vigilant, to pray for his coming at the end of time. Today we have the long-haired, locust-eating hippie - John the Baptist - waving his finger at us telling us to repent! What on earth has that got to do with tinsel and brandy custard and carol services?!

Part of the dissonance - the mismatch that we feel - is that if we in the church want to genuinely, authentically make the journey through Advent then we must see it as a journey of *preparation*. Everything else that goes on ‘*out there*’ impatiently suggests Christmas is already here; and 25th of December is, in a way, a time we start to wind it all down. Race here, rush there. Busy, busy, busy. The cheapest, the fastest, the most convenient: these are the values of our age. But we know, almost instinctively, that if something takes time, if we invest with care and attention, if we properly prepare, then we will value it all the more.

This is what this season offers us: it is an *invitation* to take time, to be attentive in our preparation for the coming of Christ. And so is placed before us the cry of John the Baptist, *Prepare a way for the Lord. Make straight his paths*. We can't just jump to the nice bits. We can't take short cuts to the reassuring bits. There is work to be done if we want our welcome of the Christ Child to be the best it can be. But as the church is careful to remind us through this season of Advent, we are not just looking back, preparing for the birth of Christ. More critically - because it is yet to come - we prepare for Christ's second coming. And in this, the Baptist's cry takes on a sharper edge.

The gift of John the Baptist – and why his life and words are held up to us at this time – is that he shows us what we must do to make room, to prepare ourselves *properly* for the coming of Christ. One of the ways we make room for God, the key way to prepare for God's coming into our lives, is by *repentance*. Now, Advent is not a penitential season per se in the way Lent is (Advent more about joyful expectation). But we see that in this season we still cannot escape the truth that to live the full human life – to receive what God is offering us at this time - then we have to turn away from our self- delusions, we have to set aside our pride, we have to put away the sinful self. It doesn't just happen though! We have to be *willing* to make it happen!

Much of our religious life depends primarily upon *our* willingness. Certainly not on the willingness of God. God's willingness is already clear. It is already given. God is already for us. We don't need any new version of God's willingness. What *is* needed is willingness on our parts. Repentance and conversion is a process of changing our lives to better equip us for that willingness. We hear the Baptist proclaim today: *Prepare a way for the Lord. Make his paths straight*. This cry shows how – in God – the impossible can become possible. *We can* fill the valleys of dark despair with the light of hope. It shows how *we are* able to move away mountains of seeming impossibilities. A life that is filled with crookedness *can be* straightened out. A life that appears terribly rough *can be* made smooth. *We can* realign our lives. *We can* reorder and reorient our lives away from the self and destruction and toward God. There is hope, even for us.

Now, there is one very simple and subtle thing that can derail this whole process of preparation and repentance. And that is our mood. Our moods can create valleys and mountains. They can frustrate our hope, our path to God. In our moods we build mountains out of the mole-hills. People we know don't attend Mass because they don't *feel* like it. Maybe that even applies to us from time to time! Some people stay away from Church because they *feel* that it's full of hypocrites. We let *our moods, our feelings, and our emotions* block the way of the Lord. We refuse repentance and conversion toward a new attitude and a new version of life because we feel it's too hard. *Willingness* is the key to a lively faith. It's a matter of the will. It's an *act of choice*. It's like love. Love is something you *choose* to do. Affection is something you feel. Religion and seeking the Lord are something that you *choose to do*.

Now of course our moods are a natural and important part of our human make up. But increasingly in our ill-disciplined world, where the self is master of the universe, our moods take on a disordered power. Yes, of course, our moods, our emotional and affective lives have a place. But it is quite wrong to allow them to rule us. The good news of God in Jesus Christ is that we are not left to be slaves to our basest selves. We are not left to rot in our sins or in the prisons of our own making. The gospel is a word of life and light, of freedom and true liberation. This is what the Baptist senses. He senses a world of new possibilities beginning to break into the world. And why he can borrow from Isaiah the prophet saying, *every valley will be filled, every mountain and hill laid low, winding ways will be straightened and rough roads made smooth*.

In other words, look to God and what is impossible can be changed into what is possible. Valleys of despair can be filled up. Through faith, mountains of sin and corruption can be moved. All that is crooked and perverse can be straightened out. A life that is rough can be made smooth. If you believe with God, then with God all things are possible. But none of that happens if we depend on our moods. It happens by our willingness, by our cooperation with God. In this Holy Season, may we be given the grace reorient our lives. May we seek to make straight the paths, to straighten out our lives – willingly, actively - that we may truly welcome Christ at his coming. Amen.