

Second Sunday of Advent, 6 December 2020

Gospel

Mark 1.1—8

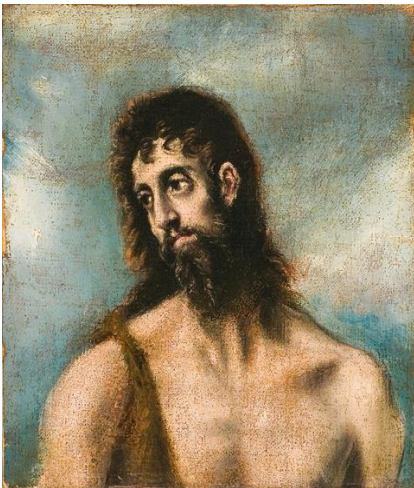
¹ The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

² As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“Look, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way,
³ the voice of one shouting in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

⁴ In the wilderness John the baptizer began preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ People from the whole Judean countryside and all of Jerusalem were going out to him, and he was baptizing them in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins. ⁶ John wore a garment made of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ He proclaimed, ‘One more powerful than I am is coming after me; I am not worthy to bend down and untie the strap of his sandals. ⁸ I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’

Prepare the way of the Lord



Friends, last Sunday (the first Sunday of Advent, when we were still shut out of church) we were given by Jesus a word to the wise, to keep us orientated on what really matters. ‘Stay awake, because you do not know, and can never know, what hour of the night the Lord will come again! Watch; don’t get comfy; he will come like a thief when you least expect.’

And today (now our churches are open again and we begin reading St Mark’s gospel) the break-in happens! Like the thief in the dead of night, that Gospel begins with one of the biggest bangs in the Scriptures. “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” In the beginning God had said, ‘Let there be light’, and there was light, and the great unfurling of creation began. Now, with the coming of Jesus the Son of Christ the great unfurling of the *new* creation begins. The actual words of the gospel are endlessly fascinating. They could mean either ‘the beginning of the gospel that Jesus *proclaims*’, or ‘the gospel which is *about* Jesus’. Of course it is both. Like a shout of good news of victory after long conflict, Mark begins his gospel, “the beginning of the gospel which Jesus proclaims, the gospel about himself!”

If an announcement about the Lord coming in glory was at the centre of last Sunday’s Mass readings, the announcement of Jesus’s victory in the world of today is at the centre of today’s. If *watchfulness* was the vital attitude last Sunday, we’re told today that *preparation* is the attitude that has to be added to it. Stay awake! *and* Be prepared!

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,’ says John the Baptist, quoting from the prophets. Staying awake and watching out isn’t enough; *getting ready* and *being prepared* are necessary too.

And it’s *personal*. It’s not just a matter of getting all your affairs in order. It is a matter of getting your *heart* in order; or for that matter getting your *mind*, your *soul* and your *strength* in order. It’s not about preparing something *external*, but about preparing your *self*. To some extent it means what we need to *do*; but mainly it means, to use a slightly old fashioned phrase that my grandad used to use about me finding a decent career, how are we going to ‘make something of ourselves’.

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John the Baptist is himself a prime example of that. (I hope to turn the spotlight on John in the coming weeks, because his part in the story of Jesus is bigger and closer to Jesus than we normally recognise. He led the way for Jesus right the way through to death. In many ways his life was as demanding as the Virgin Mary’s, but he’s much less reflected upon and his prayers are much less sought. But for today I want to point to just one aspect of his life. In the Christian East John is known, not as ‘the Baptist’, but as the Forerunner, the Preparer. Preparation is what John preaches, but it’s what he is. If *Jesus’* life is the gospel itself; *John’s* life is the straight path that prepares the way for him.

We often talk of this in terms of ‘conversion’, of people coming from no or old faith to a fresh faith in God. A turning point, a change of direction, a replacement of one thing with another. But the word that’s in the gospel (v. 4), that scripture uses, is much more interesting, *metanoia* (μετάνοια). It runs much deeper. It’s about transformation over time; a response that inaugurates a change to a new way of thinking and living that lasts over time. It’s about something deep in our inner life, in our spirits, our consciences.

Matthew begins his gospel with Jesus’s birth; *Luke* begins with John’s birth; the evangelist *John* begins with *creation’s* birth. But *Mark* begins much later than all of them with the appearance in the desert of a man who feels personally challenged by the word of God, and responds to it with his life. He’s literally a voice in the wilderness, calling to others to do the same as him and prepare their lives for the Son of God to come. The gospel begins when a human being shows the ability to start something in his life in obedience to the word of God, even if that’s confusing or painful. It’s a beginning that depends on a lively relationship with God, and that extends for a lifetime.

This was why people “from the whole Judean countryside and all of Jerusalem went out to him”. They were not going far: just the few miles east of Jerusalem into the nearby rocky desert territory that leads down and down and down to Jericho and the Jordan river, where John was baptised them as a new sign of preparation for the appearance of the Messiah.

And nor do we need to go far to enter a space, and listen to a voice that calls us to change our lives—whether that voice comes from Christ himself in prayer, or through his saints, his word, the clergy who serve our life in the Church, or one another as disciples. We need to *prepare our lives* for the good news of Jesus to take change us by his mercy and grace. It will be an experience *like* going into a barren desert waste, because it will involve us coming to terms with what is *essential*—what we *need* and what we *lack*, what we do *not* need and what we need to shake off. In the Scriptures the desert is a place of ruins, wild beasts and demons. And there is no doubt that if our lives are to be changed we will need to deal with the wild beasts of our desires, the ghosts of our hearts, the demons of our secrets, and some of the ruins of our past lives. But by listening to the word of God the human heart also experiences—bit by bit, because we can’t cope with it full-on—God’s freedom, and light, and mercy. The effect of listening to the word of God is to be able to hear God speaking to our *hearts*, and, over a lifetime, our hearts being transformed into Christ’s heart.

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But, as I have said often before, to come to terms with any of this—with any of what’s involved in trusting God with our futures, and all that’s involved in responding with confidence to Jesus’s good news—we *must know where we hope we will end up*. Everything else depends on the goal.

Therefore I want to move us forward 1300 years, from the Middle East to East Anglia, and to the visions that were experienced a hermit nun, Julian of Norwich, which she wrote up as the *Revelations of Divine Love*, one of the most important pieces of Christian reflection ever written in English. She would have definitely understood us and our times very well. Because from the age of six she endured repeated spikes of the Black Death, the plague that eventually killed more than half of Europe. So she knew what it was like to live as a Christian at a time when nothing about one’s own future could be guaranteed. Like so many of her contemporaries (and the Black Death shook the

church perhaps more deeply and for longer than the present virus is affecting us), she had to live with a strong sense of confidence that God's mercy was, somehow, at work in all that they were living through, even if they (like us in our times) can't always see how that could be.

The reason we can't, she said (chapter 32), is not because we're too sinful or stupid or stubborn to discover how the Lord's plan for the world's salvation, and our individual salvation, might work out, but because God is keeping a secret from us. In Advent terms, it is not just that Christ will *come*, but that he will come *with something*: with a great revelation, a final answer to the world's anguish. It's something you remember Jesus says before the Ascension, 'As for the day or hour of that return, no one knows: not the angels – not even the Son of God himself! – only the Father' (*Acts* 1.7). It's his secret. Julian lived her life in the belief that what the Lord would do on his return would not be a great outpouring of destruction and judgement, but an outpouring of even greater mercy and life. Something that would go *way beyond* our expectations. And that 'awaiting the joyful hope and the coming of our Saviour Jesus Christ', as we often pray, was a matter of being prepared for Lord to come and reveal *that* hoped-for secret of great mercy. It is the key to our life.

May God give us all more trust to enter into the desert and prepare more willingly for his coming in our lives, and more confidence to hope in the great mercy that he will reveal when he comes.