

The First Sunday of Advent

We begin a new year today and, for the most part, our readings from the Gospel will be from St. Mark. Here is how it begins.

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,

who will prepare your way;

the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

"Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight",

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

St Mark launches into a biblical quotation, showing that our Lord's coming was not out of the blue but was planned and prepared by God for centuries. The Old Testament background is crucial for understanding what God is doing now in Jesus. In that combination of texts God tells his people that, after their sojourn in slavery in Egypt, he will send an angel to guide them through the desert on their way to the Promised Land. Moreover, many years later, their exile in Babylon will come to an end and he will prepare a way back to their home by removing all the obstacles so that he can lead his people through the wilderness.

It is not by chance, therefore, that John the Baptist made his appearance in the desert. The desert is the place of deprivation, loneliness, and stripping away of comforts. The Hebrew people would well remember the desert as the place of testing where their ancestors had wandered for forty years after the Exodus, often complaining and rebelling against God, discovering God's severity against sin but also his patience and merciful love. During this formative period, they were learning to depend upon God to guide them and provide for all their needs – though they never learned that lesson completely.

When John began his ministry the Jews were no longer in exile, but they were under the domination of a foreign power, the Roman Empire. For centuries there had been no prophet to speak God's word to them. In the highly charged atmosphere of the time, filled with conflicting movements, hopes, and expectation for the liberation of Israel, John's 'baptism of repentance' made a powerful impact. Like the prophets of old, John was calling the nation to a wholehearted return to the Lord, a change of mind, a wholehearted return to the Lord, a deep interior conversion through the acknowledgment of their sinful state and their need for forgiveness. The time of complacency and self-sufficiency was over; the time to turn back to God in humble contrition had arrived. Although his message was hardly a soothing one, it met a deep seated hunger in the people.

This is at the heart of the Advent message. More so than at any time in recent history we have an opportunity to reflect upon being an 'Advent people'. We have ended one year and today we begin another. We are caught between a world that is dying and, at the same time, a world that is waiting to be reborn. The work of Advent, unencumbered by early celebrations of Christmas, is to bring about that rebirth: to prepare a world that is ready for the Lord's arrival. Christ's coming is both a comfort and a threat: the Messiah comes with a Gospel that proclaims the love of God and the hope of his Son's Resurrection – but it is a Gospel that imposes the Cross of humble, loving servanthood. There is a highway to be built for our God through the wilderness of hearts and societies. Through real repentance we are able to bring to life to so many wastelands and barren places. Through our charity and forgiveness we can transform so many roads and avenues into highways for God. In giving the needs of others priority over our own interests, in taking the first humbling steps towards reconciliation with God and with one another, in seeing in other people the face of Christ, we make a 'highway' in our world for the Lord who comes.

Almighty God,

give us grace to cast away the works of darkness

and to put on the armour of light,

now in the time of this mortal life,

in which your Son Jesus Christ came to us in great humility;

that on the last day,

when he shall come again in his glorious majesty

to judge the living and the dead,

we may rise to the life immortal;

through him who is alive and reigns with you,

in the unity of the Holy Spirit,

one God, now and for ever.