

Advent 2B
SFX 2023

Beginnings are important. We have just heard the first words of the first Gospel to be set down, the Gospel of Mark, written around 70AD. "The beginning of the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Imagine hearing St Mark's words for the first time. The Good News is a person, Jesus Christ. The Gospel will be about the way people come to understand him. It is less about what he taught, but who Jesus is. Mark gets straight into the story. "I've got some Good News," he says.

No childhood tales. No songs or dreams. No angels or stars. No wise men or shepherds. Instead there is John standing on the banks of the Jordan. That's him with the camel-skin coat, the locusts and wild honey. That is John, isn't it? Or is it Elijah? He eats like Elijah, dresses like Elijah. And we know that Elijah is coming before the end of time. But this *is* John, John the Baptist. Perhaps he is a new Elijah ushering in a new age. John points to Jesus who is coming. "prepare a way for the Lord."

If I was honest, John has often made me feel a bit uncomfortable, he can seem just a bit too fierce and uncompromising. There is a toughness in John that can be unsettling. He is someone who tells the truth. There is often a type of politician today who will just tell you what you want to hear. The best type of leader is someone who will tell you the truth. We need honesty to face up to the reality of our situations. We sometimes need a jolt, don't we? "*Prepare the way of the Lord,*" the Voice cries, "*make straight his paths.*" Put your life back on track.

John's is a good Advent voice because we are not all sorted. Many of us are quite frankly far from ready to meet our God. The seriousness of Advent helps us. John is inviting us to a way of approaching Advent that has to do with repentance and rededication. Is Christmas going to be one long party? Or is this a time when we take on board what the birth of Christ means. Is there something in me that needs to change to receive the Lord Christ.

We read that *All* Judea and *all* Jerusalem came down to the Jordan and confessed their sins. That is pretty effective preaching. Although John had strong words for the Pharisees and their hypocrisy, perhaps we should imagine that John not only knew how to talk straight but also "speak tenderly."

Mark's Gospel begins with a quote from Isaiah, but we have read the prophet for ourselves this morning. Reassuring words: "Comfort ye, comfort ye." "Console my people, console them." "Speak tenderly to the heart of Jerusalem".

We hear about a new road crossing through the desert that would lead the exiles in Babylon home. It is God who will lead them: "Make a highway for your God."

“The beginning of the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Some people think that Christ must be the surname of Jesus, that he would be under C in the telephone directory. But of course Christ, *Christos*, translates the Hebrew word “Messiah.” Messiah means the one who is anointed. In ancient Israel instead of crowning the King the officials would anoint him with oil. Anointing means the person is set aside, marked out, sealed as special.

John announces that when Jesus arrives he will baptise with the Holy Spirit. It doesn't take long for the Anointed One to anoint us, to fill us with his Spirit. We might go down into the waters of Baptism with Jesus, but he sends us forth filled with his Spirit. When we were confirmed, the Spirit was sealed in each of us. Each of us becomes Christ, each of us Anointed Ones filled with the gentle presence of this Spirit.

[Today Felicia and Sophie will be received into full Communion with the Catholic Church. Their anointing can remind us of our own.]

And it is Christ himself who “speaks tenderly” to us in our hearts with his Spirit. It is Christ who comforts us, consoles us. Advent is not just about getting ready for the feast of Christmas – although that is lovely. It is not just about remembering Christ's birth – although the memory is sweet to our ears. It is allowing Jesus to come closer to us now and allowing his Spirit to straighten, and level and fill in, so that the glory of the Lord is revealed not just in the crib but in each and every one of us, anointed, made his, made Christ.

We sing in that prayer for the coming of the Holy Spirit, the *Veni Sancte Spiritus*: “Cleanse what is unclean, water what is parched, heal what is wounded. Bend what is inflexible, warm what is chilled, correct what has gone astray.” We want the Holy Spirit to continue to do his work in us. Fix what is broken, mould what is misshapen, raise what is fallen, renew what is lifeless dreary in our human deserts.

The old Advent prayer for this Sunday used to say: “Father remove the things that hinder us from receiving Christ with joy.”

How lovely is Charles Wesley's hymn of the incarnation “Love Divine all love's excelling” where we rejoice that Christ comes down to make his dwelling in us. “Visit us with thy salvation, enter every trembling heart.” Recognizing that we are not yet fully what we are called to be we pray “Finish then, thy new creation” that we may be “Changed from glory into glory...lost in wonder love and praise.”

“The beginning of the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God”. Mark has hinted at this newness breaking in the very first word of the Gospel. “Beginning.” His readers would surely have heard and understood, that this was not just the beginning of a story, but they would have heard in it the first word of Genesis “in the beginning.” A new creation is at hand.