

Advent 2, 10 December 20123, Year B, Mark 1.1-8

No genealogy as in Matthew's gospel, no foretelling of Jesus' birth as in Luke's gospel, no Prologue as in John's gospel just one short sentence and we are off and running in the gospel according to Mark. "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." (Mark 1.1) It is a clear and succinct statement. The good news begins with Jesus Christ, who is the promised one, and not only is he the promised one, he is more than was hoped for or could be expected. He is the Son of God. Just one sentence and we are off and running. The world is being turned upside down.

Mark the Evangelist continues by connecting the good news of Jesus Christ immediately to the prophetic tradition and more especially to the Prophet par excellence Isaiah. It is this prophet amongst others who saw that God would send a messenger who would prepare a way by making paths straight thereby restoring His people and His dwelling place amongst them after a time of captivity. Mark citing Isaiah identifies John the Baptist as the messenger (der Wegbereiter) who prepares the way not for a restoration, but for a new creation, a new people, a New Israel. Famously Christians will become known as followers of the Way. The way that leads to God and the confession of Jesus the Christ as the Son of God.

Our interest in John, the last voice in the prophetic tradition running through the Old Testament, is in him as one who prepares the way for Jesus and he does this by appearing in the desert. It would seem out of nowhere. There in the wilderness this strange figure, "clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey", proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. It is clear that John's message has an impact. The people are ready to repent. They are ready possibly even longing to turn from the way they are set on. They are ready to confess their sins so that they may be ready to welcome the Messiah when he comes. People come to John, this strange figure, willing to be baptised by him and ready to confess their sins.

It is a lively picture that contrasts with ourselves, I suspect. Are we ready to repent. Are we willing to acknowledge our sin to ourselves, let alone confess them? Anyone who gives themselves to this honestly knows just how hard it is. Mark tells us that

people from “the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem” come to John. That’s a lot of people! This is not a trickle of people. It is not like a stream in the woods that can hardly flow because of the lack of rain in summer. This is a movement of people ready and willing to undergo as stated baptism at the hands of John, willing and ready to confess their sins. People are flocking to him. They want to be ready to welcome the Messiah, when he comes

One can speculate about the content of the confessions of sins the people made as they came to John, especially given John’s message was taken up so readily. And this is precisely, I confess, what I shall do. I shall speculate. Given the present turmoil the world finds itself did it include a confession of sins based on the political ambitions of the people to be self-governing, freed from Greek and latterly Roman domination. These political ambitions stretching back a few centuries after the restoration, after the Babylonian captivity are causing and will cause great suffering to the people ultimately leading to the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. and later to the removal of the people of Israel from Jerusalem beginning in 132 A.D. Did the people see that the trajectory they were on was a perilous one? Once again as in former times Jerusalem would be laid waste. The Psalmist has a wonderful phrase that contrasts with “our allegiance to the flag” whatever flag that may be, “Some put their trust in chariots, and some in horses: but we will remember the name of the LORD our God.”

There will have been confessions of individual sins as John baptised with water, but I suggest there is more than simply a personal and individual dimension to the picture Mark draws of the people who make their way to the Jordan River to be baptised by John. There is a collective dimension, whether I am right about my speculation, you will judge for yourselves, but I cannot free myself from the nagging feeling that we have replaced God, the living God, the God who can be known, with an allegiance to political forms, values and rights and in doing so have replaced God for human work verging on idolatry.

Here I would point to the preamble of the German constitution, which in 1949 could still refer to the divine. I cite, “Conscious of its responsibility **before God** and mankind, filled with the resolve to preserve its national and political unity and to serve world peace as an equal partner in a united Europe, the German people.... This fleeting and

unspecified reference to God, much like a fleeting nod, acknowledges that we have a responsibility to God first, before whom we are to give account. By the time of the European Constitution in 2005 this curt reference to God was no longer acceptable. It could not muster a majority, although lobbied for extensively. Religious communities however were able to persuade a majority to enshrine their legitimacy and integrity in the Constitution as a concession to their enduring reality.

I wish not to be misunderstood. I fully recognise the need for basic rights, an independent judiciary, a preference for a liberal democracy, etc. or more comprehensively in the words of the Maastricht treaty, ... "principles of liberty, democracy and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and of the rule of law". This is to be lauded and even celebrated, but I remain concerned that we as a people dedicated to God by our baptism do not "put our trust in chariots, and some in horses", whatever these horses and chariots may be, but that we will as the Psalmist indicates remember our being devoted first and foremost to God living under His Sovereignty despite the changes and chances of this fleeting world. As the Psalmist reminds us of our mission as Christians, "but we will remember the name of the LORD our God."

We, as individuals, may have come to believe ourselves to be the final arbiters of our joy, a joy of our own making, but our joy, and humanity's joy, we believe, is found in God for whom John prepares the Way. Paul, the Apostle touches on what I am giving expression to when he writes to the church in Rome, the letter to the Romans, "... and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles." Here Paul is referring to the cult of the Emperor. God's glory is imputed to a human being... Today whatever achievements we value and celebrate they must not replace or diminish the Glory of God. It is time for us to repent and confess our sins?

Yes, we are not to exchange the glory of God for images, however good and wholesome and laudable they can be for good and right ordering of society. Some have likened the American Constitution to the Word of God, which to my mind, and to their horror if they realised, is a form of idolatry.... No political system and no value

system is to replace our citizenship of God's kingdom and our loyalty to it or usurp the values of that kingdom.

On Wednesday at the midweek service of Holy Communion we heard how the seventy Jesus had appointed and then sent out in his name come back to Him, having successfully fulfilled their mission, which is to prepare the way for Jesus, rejoicing and enthusiastically reporting they could, yes, even cast out demons in his name, but Jesus quickly changes the perspective, a perspective that we too must not lose sight of and which the Church, the Body of Christ, the manifestation in time that God's saving action in Jesus Christ, who is the Son of God, is effective, should always be drawing our attention to. What does Jesus say to the seventy whose task like John's was to prepare the way for Jesus, as we are called to do today? "...do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." (Luke 10.20) This is Good News! Let us rejoice! But first let us repent, turn from our foolish ways and confess our sins, let us make ready to welcome Him into our lives anew this Christmas.