

Homily for The Second Sunday of Advent (Year A)(08/12/19)

John the Baptist is out in the wilderness, and there he starts preaching to the crowds. Its worth stopping to think about that simple statement for just a moment. He is out in the wilderness – an uncomfortable place where nobody lives, and no-one really wants to be. So where have these crowds come from? They are not passers by like he would have found on a street corner in Jerusalem. John is preaching in the wilderness, and the crowds have come there just to hear him. And what makes it even more amazing is the message: he is telling them to stop living life as they do, and change their lives from the very root. It must stop, it must change. And still the crowds keep coming.

John's message is this: The world is seriously messed up, and God is close, he is near, he is just around the corner: so we need to act now, and sort ourselves out. 2,000 years ago the people hear that message, and it strikes a chord deep down within them. They realize that this is true; and so they go out into the wilderness to hear more, and to pledge themselves to change. The world is indeed messed up, they say, but I want to be part of putting it back together.

This message that John proclaims rings out again, afresh, every year. Every year he stands in the wilderness and calls out: 'the world is seriously messed up; we need to change'. And in spite of the fact that the influence of the Church is not what it once was, and that the culture we live in for the most part rejects faith, this message does strike home. If you were to stop some people on the street and ask them: 'do you agree that the world is messed up?' I think almost everyone would agree. There are some great things about the world that we live in today, and lots of ways in which it is much better than the past, but all the same there is a lot that is wrong, and it is messed up.

One of the great themes of Advent is the theme of waking up from sleep. '*You know 'the time' has come: you must wake up now: our salvation is even nearer than it was when we were converted*' (Rom 13.11). Our salvation is nearer, but our death is too, our judgement, our calling to give an account of our lives. There are lots of different ways of waking up. There is the lazy slipping from sleep to waking on holiday, when there is nothing to rush for; there is the waking with a groan to the alarm on a working morning; there is the excited leaping from bed at the alarm on the first day of a holiday when we rush to catch an early flight; and there is the shocking waking up with the sense that something is wrong, we have heard a sound that shouldn't be there. This last is the waking that S. Paul is talking about. We wake up with a shock and instantly the adrenalin is pumping and we are hyper alert until we work out what is going on. That is the waking up that we need to do. We need to wake up at the warning sound of John crying out, and just for a few seconds we are super alert, and that is the feeling, the condition, the state of mind that we need to grasp and hold onto.

John the Baptist has woken up. He has seen that the world is messed up, and that mess is caused by us. He catches people at the moment that they wake, when

they are really alert, and calls them out to the wilderness and to change. For us, the work of Advent is to wake up and see reality. The world is in a mess, and while much of that is beyond our power to change, we can change the mess that is within us, the mess that is within our lives. We need to feel ourselves woken up with a shock.

So some time this week, put aside for a while the cards and the presents and the parties and the shopping, it will wait. And imagine yourself in the wilderness. Imagine you are there with John, and you can hear the urgency in his voice. The Lord is at hand, he is almost here. There is no time to lose. What is messed up about your life? Where have you got your priorities wrong? Where have your actions, or your words, or maybe your inaction or your silence, contributed to the mess the world is in? For most of the time we coast along, and everything seems fine because we are asleep to the faults and flaws in our lives. Advent is the time to break through that and wake up.

Here are three suggestions of things we might do to grab hold of and use the opportunity Advent gives us.

There is lots to do, and it is tempting to focus completely on the material stuff. Give yourself a break from that. Take out your rosary and say just a decade a day between now and Christmas, perhaps even do that as a family, and offer that prayer for the poor, the sick, the lonely, and everyone who finds Christmas hard.

Once you have woken up and seen the mess, resolve to change. Go to confession and pour it all out. Pour out all the ways in which the mess is your mess, the missed opportunities, the broken promises, the failed resolutions, the disappointment and the sadness. Pour it all out, hear the priest speak the words of peace, and go away rejoicing for you have been born again.

Rebel against the tyranny of busy-ness. Look the demon that tells you how much you have to do in the eye and laugh. However busy you are, take some time that you would be rushing around and squander it on a gift to someone. Sit with them and listen to them, talk with them, be with them, just enjoy human togetherness, time carved out of the busy-ness and rescued for something deeply human. The busy-busy will wait, but the chance for a real encounter with another human being, maybe someone who has precious few of them, this cannot be put off.

Around us we see a world in a mess. We can't sort it all out, but we can sort out the bit that is immediately around us. That we can tidy up and put in order again. There is no time to lose. The Lord is at hand.