

## Homily for The Third Sunday of Advent (Year A)(15/12/19)

Today's Gospel gives us, once again, a sight of John the Baptist, but this time he is no longer in the desert, he is in prison. I had never noticed for myself, until I read it in a book this week, that John's role of helping people to understand who Jesus is, pointing the way to him and opening up our minds so that we can see his real nature, is always performed in the most unlikely of places. John the Baptist introduces people to the person of the Messiah: in his mother's womb, when Mary visits Elizabeth and John leaps for joy in his mother's womb: in the wilderness, that strange and inhospitable place which is somehow a special place to encounter God, because it is a place man has not conquered, a place where he is very aware of his own vulnerability, his own littleness; and in a prison, where he has been shut away to hide him from the light, to silence his voice and make him irrelevant. Womb, desert, prison, these are the places from which John carries out his task of introducing people to the Messiah (Erasmus Leiva-Merikakis 'Fire of Mercy, Heart of The Word' Vol 1).

This Gospel story needs to be taken slowly. We need to put it into slow motion to understand what is really going on here, and the way in which people change in the course of the narrative. We start with John in prison, still waiting for a Messiah, still longing for confirmation that all he dreamed about has come to reality. His disciples are visiting him in prison. John has heard what has been going on, and so he sends his disciples to Jesus with a question. It would have been quite possible for Jesus to answer that question with 'Yes, of course, I am He, there is no need to wait for anyone else'. But Jesus seldom answers questions like that, because he wants to make people think more, to work out the answer for themselves so that it becomes something they are deeply convinced about, not just something that they have been told. So Jesus tells the disciples of John: look at what you have seen happening, what you have heard told you; stories of the blind seeing, of the lame walking, lepers healed, the deaf hearing and the poor hearing Good News. Go and tell him that. Tell him about lives transformed. Tell them the world is on fire. So John's disciples go back, but they are not the same men as they were when they set out (just as the shepherds will return to their fields outside Bethlehem not the same men, and the Magi will return home not the same men – but I am getting ahead of the story). They left John as followers of his; they return to him as evangelisers, as missionaries. They come to John and proclaim the Good News to him. They tell him that lives are being changed, that people who have met Christ are no longer the same, that the weaknesses and limitations that held them back have been undone, removed; they have been set free.

In a sense this Sunday's Gospel reading is a school of evangelisation. Followers are turned into heralds of the Gospel. It was good to be a follower of John the Baptist, just as it is good to be a follower of Christ. But it is better still to be a herald of the Gospel, a proclaimer of Good News. The disciples of John see and hear the ways in which lives are changed when people come into contact with Jesus; having heard and seen this, they pass on the message to John. That is evangelisation. The Messiah comes into the world to change lives. He comes into the world to set people free. That is the fundamental mission of the Church:

changing lives, and setting people free. The Son of God comes into the world to enrich people's lives, to make their lives better, and above all to set them free. That is the content of evangelisation: Let me introduce you to the one who will make your life richer, and set you free. That is the message that the disciples take back to John the Baptist: this man is the One, he has come to make lives better, to set people free.

So, what does this tell us about the Church? It tells us that the Church is a community of people, of all ages, races, backgrounds, who have met the Lord Jesus Christ, and whose lives have been made better by that meeting. We are more human, more authentic, more truly ourselves than we were before we met him. And because this transformation is such a wonderful thing, we cannot just keep it to ourselves. We do need to rediscover our confidence in this view of The Church. The Mass is the place where come to discover something about ourselves, about who we really are, and to live just for a little while in the pure, clear air of the desert, a place humanity has no power to tame or to destroy.

This Gospel story invites us to join with John's disciples, who are transformed today into Heralds of the Gospel. They go to John and tell him the story of lives enriched, set free, transformed. We know all this. We know that a meeting with Jesus Christ is liberating and enriching. What we experience here makes us more real, more true, more human. Surely we don't just plan to keep that to ourselves? Doesn't the world need to hear it, too?

Standing in the line for Holy Communion is like a little Advent. Every step closer to the front increases our eagerness, increases our longing. As we walk up step by step, our hearts are singing 'Rejoice! The Lord is Near'. And every communion is like a little Christmas. The long awaited one has come, come to free us and to fill us with his light that allows us to be truly ourselves. Returning to our seats we are like John's disciples, hurrying back excited at what we have heard, and seen, and tasted. At the school of evangelisation John's disciples show us that we should leave every Mass full of the excitement and joy with which they returned to John, bursting to share the news of lives transformed. That is the Church at its finest.