

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst

West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Second Sunday of Advent (Year A)
4th December 2022

Last week Advent began, and the stage was cleared of everything but the most essential items. It is bare and empty, waiting; waiting for something to begin, waiting for something to happen. And onto that empty, silent stage steps a most unusual figure. A man who looks a little wild, strangely dressed, but a man who has something about him, something magnetic that draws people to him. And when he opens his mouth and speaks, John (of course, this lonely player on the stage is John the Baptist) speaks with simplicity and power. When he opens his mouth to speak people don't notice his clothes or his appearance any longer, it's his voice that is so striking – John becomes a voice: a voice crying out on the deserted stage, a voice calling in the wilderness. 'Its time', he cries out, time to prepare a way. From the empty stage he looks us in the eye and the voice calls out: 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand'.

But what does this message mean, this austere cry from the lonely voice in the desert? It is tempting to read it as a sort of final warning: 'This is your last chance, if you don't stop what you're doing right now it will be too late and you will be in real trouble – the big policeman is at the door and he's going to catch you'. This might, I suppose, scare people into reforming their lives, and it does perhaps reflect the sort of tone that an exasperated Jesus is going to use with the Pharisees and the self-righteous religious leaders of his day, but it doesn't seem to be the way that Jesus speaks to ordinary people who are trying to do their best in difficult circumstances, nor does it seem a very good way of growing mature and committed disciples. So, if it isn't a warning about the imminent arrival of the big policeman, what is it about?

I think that there are at least two layers to the answer. The first needs us to understand that the word the gospels use for 'repent' is about turning around: turn around from the path you are following, and follow another. I was reading recently about the Orthodox Rite of Baptism, in which the person to be baptised faces West to make their renunciation of the Devil and all his fakery and tricks; then they turn around, turning their back on the one they have just renounced, and face East to make their profession of faith in the living God. They literally turn their back on the Devil and place their trust in God instead. They turn, they repent. So, when John says to people 'Repent' it is an invitation to turn, to look in a different direction, to look in a different place. So he is not saying 'change quick before the enforcer gets you' he is saying 'something exciting and beautiful and life-changing is just around the corner and you are going to miss it, because you are looking in the wrong direction!' You are looking for security, and hope, and fulfilment, and happiness in the wrong place. You need to turn around now and look in the right place, or you will miss it – your gaze will become frozen on the wrong horizon, and you will never see reality. Its time to turn.

But there is, I think, another layer of meaning to the words of this voice on the empty stage. If his message doesn't mean 'This is your last chance or a scary enforcer will get you' but it does mean 'You need to turn and look elsewhere for the fundamental meaning of your life, because if you don't turn and look in the right place, you might miss it completely', then I think it also means this: Repent – that is, change, reorder life – NOW because the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand –

and unless you change and reorder your priorities in life, you won't be there to help bring that kingdom into being. Repentance is urgent because the Kingdom of Heaven is very close, and unless we are focussed on reality, unless our mind is turned towards the things in life that really matter, well, we will be ill-equipped to bring that kingdom closer, ill-equipped to make it real here, where I live, where I work, now. The Kingdom of Heaven needs Kingdom people, it needs citizens of the Kingdom scattered all over the world to announce it, and to help make it happen. It is very close, and if we are going to make this a Kingdom place, we need to turn again, we need to be facing the right way, we need to be living as citizens of the Kingdom, looking for the signs, looking for ways to bring it to life.

Very soon the lonely figure, who is all voice, will disappear from the empty stage and be replaced by a young family, animals, angels, shepherds, all the cast of late Advent and Christmas. But for now he has the stage to himself, and he fills the world (well, as much as will listen) with his words: 'Repent, the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand'. Stop for a while, and look again. A star is appearing, a star that offers hope, and peace, and security and joy. If you are looking for those things somewhere else, you are looking in the wrong place and you need to turn again, or you will miss them. The Kingdom is at hand, and how quickly it will take root depends on us, it depends on us turning and looking again in the right places. To some extent the work of Advent is just this, to turn away from all the noise and the dazzle and the sparkle (to enjoy them a little, of course, but not to think they offer an answer to the world's needs) and to turn instead to that lonely figure on the stage, and the star he points to, and to look for the seeds of the Kingdom, so that we can be Kingdom people making our lives, our homes, our church outposts of the Kingdom. There is no time to waste: the voice is calling.