

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Second Sunday of Advent (Year C)
Sunday December 5th 2021

John is in the wilderness. While he is there, the word of God comes to him, and he begins to speak. He doesn't go into the wilderness because the word tells him to go out there, he is already in the wilderness. He has been there for years and years, and it is only after many years living in the wilderness that the word comes to him. All his adult life he has been there, waiting. Over the years the message must have begun to crystallise, to become clear, but still he stays silent. He lives in the desert, carrying the word within him, just as Mary carries the Word within her, and he is waiting for the message that the time is right, the time to speak has come. Now that day is here.

The word that John speaks is a summons to reality: become once again what you were always meant to be and what, perhaps, you once were! Stop and look back look and see what you were once capable of, and find your way back. 'Stand on the heights' Baruch tells the people of Israel, and John says to them 'What are you doing messing around in the dirt, fiddling around where no-one can see you, get back to where you belong, back to the heights'. Israel has a job to do: to model the best of human living, to model a life that is beautiful, to model a way of living that makes people stop in their tracks and say 'that is what I want'. Go back to what you once were, to what you can be again.

There is one word that appears again and again in that first reading, that is clearly intended to be one of the pillars of the best of human living: integrity. 'Wrap the cloak of the integrity of God around you'. What is this integrity? How do we know it when we see it, and how can we develop it in ourselves?

Something has integrity if everything about it fits into place and it all sits perfectly together. This building has integrity because everything in it fits into place as part of a whole: it may not be exactly as it was originally designed, but everything that has been done to it has been done with care so that the new and the old fit together; parts of it may look very different, but there is nothing here that makes you say 'what's THAT doing here?' Why is there a bathtub in the church; or a van parked on the sanctuary, or whatever. A thing has integrity if everything about it fits together. For a person, integrity is very similar. A person has integrity if everything about their life fits in with everything else. What they say they believe in is made real in the way they behave themselves. What they say that other people should do is what they are doing themselves. When they say something, they mean it; if they say they will do something, they do it. You know where you are with a person of integrity because what you see, and what you hear, is what you get.

We all know that integrity is immensely attractive. We all want our friends to be people of integrity, people we can trust to say what they really think, to do what they say they will do, and to mean what they say. We also know that this can be difficult sometimes. We know

what we ought to do, and it is easy to talk about it, but sometimes very hard to do it. Everything can become a bit fractured in our lives. We say what we ought to do, or what we wish we could do, or what we want other people to think we will do, but somehow actually doing it seems very hard. Even if we really want to do something good, somehow we just don't. This is nothing new. St Paul was frustrated with himself for exactly this reason: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." (Romans 7.15). Our lives can start to dis-integrate, to come apart. We say one thing, but mean something else, and actually do something different again. Advent, with its focus on integrity, is about rediscovering the way that things should really fit together, and making it happen. Our lives are like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. They are created to have a beautiful integrity, to fit together and form a pattern, but they have become jumbled and the pattern is obscured. Only by putting them back together again in the right places can the pattern, the beautiful reality of our lives, be revealed. In fact, as long as the pieces are jumbled up and in the wrong order, it is not even possible to tell if some of them are missing. The only way to tell that some important part of our life has dropped away completely, is to put the other pieces back together where they belong, and then it becomes obvious. We can see clearly if pieces are missing, or if somehow pieces from a different puzzle altogether have crept in.

The prophet Baruch calls us to live lives of integrity. John the Baptist does much the same in the Gospel reading when he summons us, in the words of Isaiah, to make his paths straight. The quickest way to Heaven is along a path that is straight. Our lives are full of obstacles: hills and valleys, rivers and lake; we are tempted to let the path meander around them. We leave unrepented sins unchallenged; we leave damaged relationships fractured; we leave scary decisions untaken, and problems unresolved. So natural obstacles stand between us and the quickest path to Heaven. It is Advent, time to make the paths straight, time to reassemble the scattered pieces of our lives, time to become even more than before people of integrity. Then indeed all humanity shall see, and love, and delight in and seek, the salvation of God.