

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Third Sunday of Advent (Year C)
Sunday December 12th 2021

John the Baptist is preaching, and he has managed to hit the preacher's 'bullseye'. People say that the preacher should ask themselves 'what do you want them to do', and so the greatest success comes when people respond by saying 'I need to do something, things need to change'. That is what John has achieved. Everyone is asking him 'What should I do?' – the crowd, the tax collectors, the soldiers, everybody. They have all realised that things are not ok as they are, and they need to change. There is a real buzz, a real excitement; something extraordinary is afoot.

But there is a problem. John's success in breaking open people's hearts, in helping them realise that all is not as it should be, and inspiring them to choose change, has led to a sense of expectancy. The people are so moved by what he says, and by the way in which his life and his words tie together, that they are beginning to think he may be the Christ. This is definitely not what he wants. 'No, not me, I am the witness, I am the sign pointing to one who follows, one who is more powerful than I am'. The sense of expectancy is all to the good, but John is very clear. If you are full of expectancy, full of hope, full of anticipation, that must be focussed on Christ alone. No-one else can solve the problems, no-one else can put the world back together again. Secular Messiahs all have feet of clay, because they only ever deliver a part of the solution. Always there is something missing, something lacking, something flawed and so the salvation that they offer us is at best partial, and at worst is catastrophic and violent and oppressive, forcing people to adopt their view of what the ideal world might look like.

Part of the role of John the Baptist is precisely this: to help us see that our expectancy must be directed to Christ alone, not to any secular figure, however much they claim to offer us a perfect society, a kind of Heaven on earth. No purely human hero can fulfil the hopes of humanity, they are all flawed, even the best of them. Expectancy is good, it is a sign that our hearts are open to a richer way of living, but John points people away from himself. 'Don't look at me, look at him'. Only one who comes in great humility, in weakness, can fulfil your expectations. Only one who refuses all power, corrupting influence that it is, other than the power to heal, the power to make whole, the power to forgive, the power to put lives back together again, the power to soak up people's hatred and violence, the power to remain standing when all the anger of the world is thrown at him, only one such as this can be a proper object of our hope and our expectancy. Secular leaders, philosophers, theorists, writers, all these will fail and let us down. Even religious leaders can only ever lead us so far, and are plausible and worth listening to only in so far as they point us to another, to one above them and beyond them.

So, to echo the question that the crowds asked John, what should we do? We should be suspicious of those who tell us they have the answers, or that they know how to mend the

broken world, unless they are pointing beyond themselves to another, to one who they are happy to accept as a master and a guide. We should always measure those who want to lead us against what we read of Jesus in the scriptures. Is this person who wants our attention, our support, even our obedience, binding up hearts that are broken? Are they setting people free? Are they bringing light into dark places, and warmth into cold ones? If not, why should I listen to them?

What must we do? We must learn how the story plays out in all its fulness, the story that begins at Christmas, the story of the life of Christ. Do we really know him? Are we familiar with the things he does, and the things he says? Do we know how he responds to people, how he deals with them, how he approaches them?

The air of expectancy that John creates by his preaching is an expectancy that needs to be filled by Christ. Only he will be able to fulfil it without letting people down. John pointed people to him: follow him, not me; listen to him, not me; watch what he does, not me. As Christmas draws closer perhaps we could follow John's advice and turn to the Lord. Perhaps we could say that this will be the year that we welcome Christ and follow him, reading the Gospels so that we know what he really says, how he really acts. Sometimes we think that we know him know all the stories and the big quotations, but when we actually look we see that we had things wrong. We didn't know him as well as we thought.

Whatever we are hoping for, he is the answer. Whatever is missing in our lives, he will supply it. We can trust him and follow him because he never seeks to compel or to use power to control us, only to heal and to forgive and to save us. If you would know what human living can be at its best, its finest, its richest, you need look no further.