

## **Second Sunday of Advent**

If you had come into Our Lady of Mercy Church this week you may have been looking for Michelangelo at the top of the scaffolding that was at the back of the church. There was a painter there, but his name was Craig, not Michelangelo. What impressed me about Craig was that he took a lot of time on the scaffolding before he opened a can of paint. He knew that before he could paint the wall there was a lot of preparation that had to happen. As he was filling the holes in the plaster he could well have been singing the words of the Prophet Isaiah, "Let every valley be filled in, every mountain and hill laid low, let every cliff become a plain, and the ridges a valley."

Many of us are familiar with those words being sung as part of Handel's Messiah. They were read today to capture something of the Season of Advent. And every Advent we also meet John the Baptist. John the Baptist comes today to stir up a sense of longing for the one who will baptise us with the Holy Spirit. He invites us to go with him out into the desert to recall the journey our spiritual ancestors made from slavery into freedom when God washed them clean in the waters of the river Jordan. He invites us to admit that we are sinners and are in need of God's forgiveness if we are to be ready to meet the Lord again.

Mark's gospel begins with this scene. He tells us that this is the beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ the Son of God. That first verse is so rich in meaning that will be unpacked as we make our way through his gospel. Immediately Mark tells us about John the Baptist. He is the one who will prepare the hearts of God's people to receive this good news about Jesus the Christ. People were longing for the Christ to come. They were awaiting someone who would establish God's reign upon the earth. They were waiting for someone who would restore God's justice. They were awaiting someone who would set them free from all that held them captive. We join them as they await his coming.

The people of Israel were expecting that a prophet would come to prepare the way for the Christ, God's anointed one. Legend had it that the great prophet Elijah did not die, but was taken up to heaven alive in a fiery chariot. Most people thought that he would be the one that God would send to prepare for the Christ. John the Baptist is painted by Mark in Elijah's colours. Mark has him eating locusts and wild honey and he is dressed in Elijah's camel skinned clothes. And like Elijah he calls his hearers to justice and a change of heart. John demands that his hearers undergo a baptism of repentance. But he makes it clear that he is only preparing the way for someone much greater than he is.

“Someone is following me, someone who is more powerful than I am, and I am not fit to kneel down and undo the strap of his sandals. I have baptised you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.”

We still need to hear John’s message today if we are to prepare well for the coming of the Lord. John comes to shake us out of our comfortableness. John forces us to switch off the cruise control and to drive according to the conditions of the road. John helps us to look again at how well we are living as disciples of Jesus and to recognise those areas of our lives that need to change. He calls us to a baptism of repentance in whatever way we need that. He invites us to go into the river with him so that God may wash us clean of anything that holds us back from living fully in union with Jesus.

During advent many people take the opportunity of celebrating the sacrament of Reconciliation. There was a time when many of us would have celebrated this sacrament quite regularly. Many of us now rarely take advantage of it .Pope Francis often speaks about Reconciliation as a gift to the Church, as a way of meeting our merciful Lord. This sacrament is not just about the past. It is a beautiful meeting with the one who promises to strengthen us and to walk with us on the road ahead. Reconciliation is a sacrament that graces us with the virtue of hope. We will have some

extra opportunities to celebrate the sacrament in the weeks before Christmas

Advent is the time when we especially ask God to give us hope. We look forward in hope for the coming of the Lord at the end of time. All that we do now to prepare for his coming is done in hope. How fortunate we are to be people of faith and people of hope.

We wait in hope for the Lord to come again to us. We do all that we can to be open and ready for the gift that God is for us. We open our hearts to God so that God may find a home there. As we read in the second letter of St. Peter today, “What we are waiting for is what he promised, the new heaven and new earth, the place where righteousness will be at home. So then my friends, while you are waiting, do your best to live lives without spot or stain so that he will find you at peace.”