

Second Sunday of Advent

We all develop ways of doing things that become habits that are hard to change. We have our own ways of frying eggs or making our beds or hanging out the washing. We develop a golf swing that usually works; we have a favourite way of picking our roses; we do most of our shopping at the same supermarket. We become uneasy when someone asks us to change our usual ways of doing things. We resist changing things that we have been doing for a long time.

John the Baptist came to make the people of Israel uneasy. He called people to change many of the ways that they had been doing for a long time. “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand.” When we hear the word “repent” we sometimes think that someone must have found out how big a sinner we are. But we do not have to be a big sinner to repent. To repent is really to change direction; to discover again the road that we should be taking so that we can live life to the full and be free enough to love in the way that God calls us to love. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand. We hear John say those words to us today. They are the very same words that Jesus used to begin his public ministry. John fulfils the expectation that people had that God would send a messenger to prepare a way for him when he came to establish his rule.

The idea of God re-establishing his rule on earth was a very important part of the faith and the hope of the people of Israel. Jesus speaks a lot about it. In Matthew’s gospel we see it spoken of mainly as the kingdom of heaven. In the other gospels it is spoken of mainly as the kingdom of God. Jesus used a lot of parables to describe what the Kingdom of Heaven was like. We probably understand it best if we think of it in terms of letting God rule over us, letting God lead us in the way of truth, love and justice.

What it demands from us and others is a change of direction, a change of heart. We need to turn away from anything that prevents us from being at one with God. This is the message that most of us find difficult to hear and to act upon. But when we do, we discover that it is an invitation to life.

When the Pharisees and the Sadducees came to John the Baptist to be baptised John challenged them. It was not enough to go through the ritual of seeking forgiveness from their sins. The ritual was merely a sign that they were willing to change. “But if you are repentant, produce the appropriate fruit.” John challenges all of us to show by the way that we live that we are ready to let God change our hearts and make them like his own. We cannot presume anything. We cannot claim that our

baptism will save us if we do not allow the gift of God's Spirit to move how we live.

John the Baptist saw himself as preparing the way for the Lord. "A voice cries in the wilderness: prepare a way for the Lord; make his paths straight." John expected that when the Lord came, he would act as God's judge. "He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire." John wasn't talking about Christian Baptism, but about the testing that will separate the good from the bad, the just from the unjust. "His winnowing fan is in his hand; he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into his barn; but the chaff he will burn in a fire that will never go out."

A little later in the gospel we discover that John is a bit disappointed in Jesus. Jesus proves to be much gentler than John expected him to be. He leaves the judging to his Father and goes about drawing people to him and his Father by the depth of the love that he has for them.

This is the Jesus that we are preparing for this Advent. He doesn't force himself upon us. He doesn't demand that we follow his ways. But to miss the invitation to draw close to him in response to his love for us is to miss something that is more valuable than life itself.

During the season of Advent, we have the opportunity to read many beautiful passages from the Hebrew Scriptures that can be heard as being fulfilled in the person of Jesus. The king described by the prophet Isaiah in our first reading today, is one upon whom the spirit of the Lord rests, a spirit of wisdom and insight, a spirit of counsel and power, a spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord. It was after Jesus was baptised by John the Baptist that the Spirit of the Lord was seen to come down upon Jesus. And that is the Spirit that you and I received when we were baptised and confirmed. Those words from Isaiah describe what we call the gifts of the Spirit, gifts that we opened our hearts to when we received the Sacrament of Confirmation.

It is a grace to understand the call to repentance to be another gift from God. God's spirit moves us to accept the call to change the way that we might be doing things. God's spirit moves us to discover a better road to walk along. God's spirit gives us the courage to leave behind some of our comfortable selfish ways and to go where the Lord of life leads us.