

Advent 2 Year B 2020

When 'Lock Down' first started back in March, a fellow priest said to me 'Christine, when this is over, you will have to have a really big party', and I thought 'what a wonderful idea'. So I sat down and wrote a guest list, planned a menu and even did a shopping list - I will need to buy this, I already have that, I must check and see if I have the other. Several times, though March and April, I adjusted the menu, and the shopping list, but the plan remained the same - end of 'Lock down', big party. Gradually, I gave up on the idea, and the guest list, the menu and the message line have disappeared. I had lost hope that it would ever happen, that it would ever be over.

I expect the people of Israel, in exile in Babylon, in the 6th BCE, were in pretty much the same position. The party was never going to happen - they would never have the joyous homecoming they longed for - they were stuck where they were. Then along comes a prophet whom we call 'second Isaiah', the prophet of exile and return, with his glorious cry 'Comfort, comfort my people' - God's instruction to his heavenly messengers; they are to convey to 'the heart of Jerusalem', to the people of Israel, three glad messages, each beginning with the word because:-

because, the time of punishment is ended - they have served their term of punishment for their faithlessness to the Covenant;

because God has forgiven his people and put away his weapons of war,

and finally

because the people have received double punishment for their sins.

The forgiveness of Israel means that God will return to be with his people - although, of course, he had never left them; it just seemed that way. He will return along a road which the heavenly host will prepare so that God's return can be swift and unimpeded - and this return is absolutely certain because the Lord has promised it. And then, then, God will do a new thing - He will gather up all the ancient promises and bring them to completion.

And it is this completion which Mark anticipates as he opens his Gospel, with the stark announcement 'The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God'. It is a very bold (and bald) statement. This is the beginning. This is Good News. This is about Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah. Except it isn't - at least it

isn't in the proclamation we have today. Having told his listeners that this is the Good News of Jesus Christ, we get - by way of second Isaiah, with a little bit of Malachi (3.1) thrown in, plus a passing reference to the Book Exodus (23.20) we get John. Mark wants us to know that Jesus (and indeed John) don't come out of nowhere - they come as fulfillment of prophecy. This isn't a brave, new thing; it is completion of something long planned, long promised. Looking like Elijah and acting like the heavenly messengers of Isaiah, John calls the people, oppressed by Roman rule and trodden upon by their own leaders, not to rebellion, warfare, civil disobedience - but to repentance.

For an oppressed people, repentance doesn't seem a very attractive proposition, does it? And yet it fits the pattern. Time and again the people, and especially their leaders, had turned away from God and disaster had overtaken them - warfare, famine, drought, destruction, exile. Now, calling on all that history, John reminds the people who come to listen to him - the little people, the marginalized people, the 95% of the people who were the 'have nots' - that God will come to their aid yet again, if they repent - if they, on a personal level, turn away from sin, and, on a national level, turn away from idolatry (as often the worship

of money or power, rather than 'false gods') and turn back to YHWH.

The exile they had suffered in Babylon has followed them home - in the form of repressive occupation. To return from this exile, they must return to YHWH. By coming from the whole of Judea and Jerusalem, the people show their willing to start again. If only their leaders had come with them!

The baptism John administered in the river Jordan was a fresh start, a symbolic act of cleansing, a preliminary to the new baptism in the Spirit which Jesus would bring. John's listeners had to stand apart from their own lives, take a hard look at themselves and see how they had failed their heavenly Father, individually and as a nation, in order to receive true forgiveness and to believe what John was telling them - someone more powerful than he was coming. What a source of joy - what good news.

John's message is as much for us as it was for those who first heard it. He calls out to us today to make the same changes, the same preparation to receive the Good News, by putting our relationship with God and with others right. It isn't always easy - I would say that it is seldom easy - none of us like to admit fault,

weakness, shortcoming – which is why the Church gives us Advent as a time not just of waiting but also of preparation – it is like that heavenly messenger crying out 'Prepare the way of the Lord'. Advent is a time to stand honestly before God and ask for the forgiveness He longs to give us.

Each year on Easter Eve at the Vigil, we renew our baptismal vows, but I was wondering if it would not make more sense to do that on Advent Sunday, the first day of the Church's Year – our liturgical New Year's Resolution of Commitment to Christ.

Will you continue in the Apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in the prayers?

Will you proclaim the good news by word and deed, serving Christ in all people?

Will you work for justice and peace, honouring God in all Creation?

Do you believe
in God the Father,
who made the world?

All **I believe.**

Do you believe
in God the Son,
who redeemed humanity?

All **I believe.**

Do you believe

in God the Holy Spirit,
who gives life to
God's people?

All **I believe.**

This is the faith of the Church.

Answer *This is our faith.*

We believe in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

All **Amen.**

John comes out of the wilderness to call the people to repentance. He calls us to come out of the wilderness of our own making to prepare for an encounter with the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Now, that really is a reason for organizing a really big party. – and I wouldn't need to draw up a guest list – because everyone would be welcome.