

## The Second Sunday of Advent

I would be making a mistake if I did not refer from the start to the first line of the Gospel that we have just heard from St. Mark. "The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God". In a commercial world with Winchester designated the Christmas Capital, the beginning of Mark's Gospel could easily raise a few eyebrows as he makes no mention of Jesus, birth or the events in Bethlehem. He begins with the adult Jesus seeking Baptism from John in the Jordan wilderness.

My reading of the situation is that Mark was writing his Gospel for a small house church of the Lord's followers the members of which were living in fear of their lives and were urgently asking the question "Where is the risen Lord Jesus now? Why cannot he come to save us from the crisis and threat that surrounds us?" They lived in a time of fierce and bloodthirsty persecution under an unbalanced Roman Emperor called Nero. Mark safely assumed that they already knew about the details of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem and they wanted to hear a message from Mark which would begin to answer their questions about living as Jesus' followers in impossibly difficult times.

So St. Mark takes another angle and begins his presentation about the Good News of Jesus in the Wilderness of Judea. Deliberately making the point that somehow the wilderness that they were experiencing in their lives was connected to the wilderness where Jesus began his ministry. In fact, the wilderness was the place which symbolised, and in which people believed, threatening powers where living and at work. It was precisely into this wilderness that Jesus came as Good News. The beginning of his ministry connected with the beginning in the Book of Genesis where life and creation emerged out of a formless void. Jesus is the one who has the power to be Good News for people in the wilderness of pain and suffering; Jesus is Good News because he is the Christ. This means that he is anointed, set apart and comes from God to bring wholeness, healing and peace to those who live in darkness, in fear and in the threat of continual peril. More than that Jesus is the Son of God. He is intimately part of God and so the recipients of Mark's Gospel can rejoice and give thanks that Jesus the Christ is with them in every aspect of their own personal wilderness.

The forbidding wilderness of the Judean desert; the wilderness of Mark's first listening community and the wilderness of this community which has become Mark's Gospel household, amounts to the same thing. It is into that wilderness that Jesus the anointed one comes to plant and grow his kingdom of justice, love and peace; the time and place of his love and power in the world.

The 'beginning' for us at this stage of Advent is not the birth of Jesus or even the Christmas festivities. Winchester may be the Christmas capital but its obvious and blatant commercialism is no help to us. No, John the Baptist, who speaks to us today, exhorts us to prepare a way for the Lord through the experience of repentance. A little later on, Jesus says the same thing when he says "the time is fulfilled, the Kingdom is near, repent and believe the Good News.

Yes, the Advent challenge for us today is for us to review our lives and ask the Lord to help us see how we must change. This must be part of our Advent prayer and the experience will sharpen our spiritual sight and hearing so that we might know a little more clearly how the Lord is calling us to change. For each of us the need for repentance and realignment towards Jesus Christ and his message will be different, though it will always be necessary whatever form it takes. As we prepare for our Advent confession and the Sacrament of Penance a number of areas might be worth mentioning where often there is a need for change and repentance and more openness to God.

Mark begins his Gospel in the wilderness and that could well be a good place for us to begin. In personal lives wilderness can mean sickness, fatigue, and abiding sadness, a broken or challenging relationship and the list could be endless. The change or new direction for us might be greater trust in the power of the Jesus working in our lives.

One striking aspect of the Judean wilderness, where John was discovered, is the stillness and silence. This could be the challenge for many of us. In a world so full of sound and the hustle and bustle of life, a bit like a speeded up film, Advent repentance invites us to find stillness and silence in which we can listen to which direction the Lord is inviting us to follow. So often his invitation or challenge will be located first in our hearts and will take shape and form in our minds. Don't be frightened of it because it is life giving.

It could be that the stillness and silence of prayer, so vital for our spiritual well being, is too frightening because it might bring us to face some huge and difficult issue in our lives that we would prefer to keep at bay, away from our immediate experience and reflection. While this is a temptation for us all, it is one to be avoided, because it is precisely those difficult issues where the Lord is at work leading us through to a solution and greater personal peace.

And then there are the false God's, those created things on which we are dependent for more than they can give. It could be shopping, money, drink, some form of sexual gratification, a relationship where we exercise excessive control and manipulation.

All of these, and I suspect more, are some of the areas where we need to change, move in a new direction and seek forgiveness and new strength. This is something we do everyday, because everyday will bring new insight into our weakness and our need of God's healing love. The power of the Lord's healing Spirit, forgiving, making whole, giving strength, reconciling and restoring is the Sacrament of Penance and confession to a priest. There are many opportunities for this during Advent and especially at our two penitential liturgies just before Christmas.