

Sunday Homily

2ND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

6 DECEMBER 2020

YEAR B

“John the baptiser appeared in the wilderness,
proclaiming a baptism of repentance for
the forgiveness of sins.”

Mark 1:4

Illustration

A class of fourteen-year-olds was asked: “Who is John the Baptist for you?” One student put up his hand and replied: “He is a wild man – cool!” Asked to explain, he said he admired John for being able to live in the desert without any visible means of support, admitted some curiosity regarding his clothing, some amusement and “Eeew” factor at the thought of eating locusts, although the honey was “okay.” The class consensus was that John was more interesting than many of the characters we read about in the New Testament, many of whom were seen as “goody-goody,” while John had something of the anarchist about him.

The students were right to see John as the “wild man of God.” John is a complex character whose life had several levels of meaning for the ministry of Jesus. But he also has several messages for us, too, partly because he represents an image of godliness we may not have considered, but also partly because much of what John is, and does, could well address our own vocation as disciples.

Gospel Teaching

We know already that John was special, born of parents blessed by a miracle which brought about his birth, as the Gospel of Luke tells us. His family was of priestly line and, though certain rigorous requirements were made concerning his upbringing, his family would have experienced a certain status in the community.

His parents knew from the angelic message that John must be dedicated to God and that his role would be key in the coming of the Lord among the people: that is, the arrival of the long-awaited Messiah.

The fact that he apparently threw up his birthright, and left his family, pursuing a life of asceticism, and proclaiming the coming judgement loudly and vividly, says something about him which his family was not prepared for. John lived his conviction that his role was to attract enough attention to transmit his message: that the time had arrived, the Messiah was imminent, the moment was now, there was no time to waste!

But John's appearance and lifestyle were not just a gimmick to attract attention: they were a preparation, a cleansing and a method of living out the very repentance that he preached as essential to others. God called him, and then worked from within John's apparent "wildness" and, in doing so, exposed a part of God that we rarely consider: that God too has a "wild" side, when the need arises. God does not always operate through Mr and Mrs "Nice", but sometimes chooses people whose attractiveness to some may, indeed, rather repel others.

God wants to appeal to the whole spectrum of humanity, not just the respectable and already godly, and so calls forth the appropriate types of evangelist to suit all groups and types. (Unfortunately it is now too often true that the Church itself limits this role only to those who fit a particular mould, those least likely to cause "havoc".) At the start of the Jesus movement, God needed strong, enthusiastic and sometimes fiery people with stamina and "grit" to energise the new Church, and God still needs such people today.

The seed of God's own wild Spirit planted in John enabled him to prepare the way for Jesus by gathering a group around him who, it is now believed, transferred their allegiance to Jesus when the time came. John was the key to the start of Jesus' ministry – perhaps such uncomfortable prophets are the key to the regeneration of the Church today?

Application

Living in the desert and dining so frugally is probably not what the practice of Christianity means for us; but stepping outside the mould which society and the Church create for us may well be.

John passed up his respectable life to follow God's path as his own. He taught by word and example, and told his message clearly and unequivocally; he lived, and stuck to, his own truth and, through his determination to be himself, showed us how to do the same. Perhaps it is this combination of attributes to which young people are drawn. John lived authentically his vocation as given to him by God. He encourages us to accept the invitation to be wild for God and, in being so, to permit God to be wild in the world, to shake it up, through us. Without John, Jesus would have been sorely deprived, and our students would have lost a "cool" role model.

Sunday Homily

3RD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

13 DECEMBER 2020

YEAR B

"He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed,
'I am not the Messiah.'"

John 1:20

Illustration

In one of the episodes of the American television comedy *Friends*, Phoebe is challenged to do a good deed from which she derives no benefit at all. It proves much harder than she expected. Every time she does something kind or generous, somehow it always turns out to contain something for her, too. The serious question in the midst of Phoebe's increasingly desperate attempts to do something completely unselfish is whether there can really be a wholly altruistic act, or whether, like it or not, we always act only to benefit ourselves in some way or another.

Gospel Teaching

On the face of it, John the Baptist does seem to have achieved Phoebe's goal. It is very hard to see what John the Baptist gets out of his witness to Jesus.

As we meet John at the beginning of the Gospel accounts, he is at the height of his fame. He has a great many disciples and people flock to hear him preach and to be baptised by him. He says what God gives him to say, under all circumstances, and without softening his message to suit important ears. He is not afraid to reprove King Herod for his immoral lifestyle, for example.

The religious leaders of his day are clearly impressed enough by John to wonder if he can be the Messiah for whom they are all waiting. He has all the right credentials. He comes from a priestly family, and his birth is surrounded by miracle and prophecy.

What's more, his message of judgement and his call to repentance are exactly what the religious authorities would expect the Messiah to say. All the prophets of old echoed John's warning to the people to repent or face God's judgement. Taken in conjunction with John's fearlessness in the face of authority, which would surely make him willing, if necessary, to take on the hated Roman usurpers of the nation's independence, it is entirely understandable that they come to ask John, point-blank, "Who are you?"

If there is any area of uncertainty in John, any deeply buried belief that perhaps he is, after all, God's chosen Messiah, the Gospels show no sign of it. He is emphatic in his denials.

We do not know quite how John prepared himself for this time, though tradition has it that he lived as an ascetic in the desert for many years before starting his ministry. Matthew's Gospel tells us that he wore clothes of itchy camel's hair, and lived on locusts and wild honey, all of which would seem to bear out the testimony to his self-denying lifestyle. But whatever he has been doing for the years since his birth, it has honed his vocation to this point, the moment at which he can say, forcefully, "I am not the Messiah."

As far as the Gospels are concerned, when John has baptised Jesus and recognised him and witnessed to him, his work is done. When John is later imprisoned and then executed by Herod that is a sad event but not a tragic one for the Gospel writers, because John has already fulfilled his life's purpose.

Humanly speaking, it is hard to see what satisfaction John could have got from his mission. A life of self-denial, brutally cut short; an influential ministry, remembered only in the context of someone else's far more important work – hardly the epitaph most of us would wish for.

But all the years of prayer and attention to God that allowed John to stand up and say with utter clarity, "I am not the Messiah," may perhaps have given him enough insight to know his own value in God's eyes. John was doing the thing for which he was born; he saw what all the prophets longed to see – God's Messiah coming to bring justice and peace to the whole world. So perhaps his altruism had its rewards, after all.

Application

John's calling is unique. He was born to stand on the cusp between the old world and the new creation in Christ. He was born to point forward to what all the rest of us can now receive. Thanks, at least in part, to his faithful witness, we do not have to wonder if Jesus is God's fulfilment or not. We know.

But now we have to take up John's mantle and bear witness to Jesus. John did it alone, and when no one else recognised Jesus, but he did what we are all born to do. He saw who Jesus was and he told the world. Now it's our turn.

Sunday Homily

4TH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

20 DECEMBER 2020

YEAR B

"Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord;
let it be with me according to your word.'"

Luke 1:38

Illustration

Relationships are very delicate things. When they are healthy, they help us to grow in confidence and maturity and they free us to relate better to others, because we know that we are loved and valued. If our important relationships are healthy, we are able to think beyond our own needs and concerns and look to others. However, unhealthy relationships can be very damaging: they can actually make us more selfish and preoccupied with our own little world. They can make us feel very insecure, and insecurity can manifest itself in many different ways.

One of them, and it is a danger in any relationship, is the desire to own the other person, to control them, to possess them and keep them for ourselves. Whether it be a relationship between adults or children, as soon as we cease to treat the other with respect and just see them as an object to satisfy our own needs rather than as persons with needs and concerns of their own, then that relationship becomes unhealthy and damaging for all concerned. We do not love the other person as ourselves, but we are concerned only for ourselves.

Gospel Teaching

Today's readings give us an example of a healthy and an unhealthy relationship with God. David has an apparently natural desire to do something for God by building a Temple. But his motives are mixed: a Temple in his capital city would help him consolidate control over his kingdom. He tries to use God for his own political purposes, but God none too gently reminds David of who exactly is in control. We can all be tempted like David. He wanted to use God for his own ends. We, too, want a tame God, a God who doesn't challenge us or ask awkward questions about our lives. We prefer a God who acts as a crutch or support when we need him, but not one who makes us uncomfortable.

Contrast this with Mary. She was engaged to be married, she had her own plans for her future. Her life seemed settled, ordered. Yet she allowed God to enter her life and upset all her own hopes and intentions. This was no easy thing for Mary to accept – she is initially disturbed and confused by Gabriel's message, and needs the angel to reassure her. She very naturally asks questions – she doesn't understand how what God wants can be done.

But Mary has a healthy relationship with God. She allows God to be a real person in her life, not an object who is there just to make her feel good. She allows her relationship with God to challenge her to grow as a person, to grow into the person God had created her to be. Above all, unlike David, she needs no reminding of who she is and who God is. She doesn't try to make God compromise. She simply acknowledges that she is God's servant: she makes God's will her own, not the other way round. And as she surrenders herself and her will and her whole life to God, so she begins to live the fullness of life that her son, our saviour, came to bring.

Application

As the great event of Christ's birth, Christmas, draws near, Mary offers us a timely example of how we can enjoy a healthy relationship with God and what the consequences might be. God will make demands of us because he wants us to grow into the people he has created us to be. He wants us to live life in all its fullness, and he knows how it can be possible. As with Mary, he wants our relationship with him to be life-giving both for ourselves and for others.

We too are offered the opportunity to say "Yes" to God. We too are his servants, we too can surrender ourselves and our lives to God. It may cost us everything, but it is the way to life in all its fullness, because as we surrender ourselves and open our hearts to God, so he will fill us with his love and presence. And God's love can continue to be made real in our world through our relationship with him and with those he gives us to love. That is what our heavenly Father wants for us this Advent.

Sunday Homily

1ST SUNDAY OF CHRISTMAS

27 DECEMBER 2020

YEAR B

"I am bringing you good news of great joy
for all the people."

Luke 2:10

Illustration

Well, here we are. How do you feel just now, I wonder. Is there a warm glow of joyful contentment; a sense of present-opened, turkey-loving satisfaction? Or perhaps there's anxiety over family tensions, or a sense that you never want to see another sprout again? Many of us today will feel a bit of relief, for all sorts of reasons, one of them being that we can at last stop buying things, or feeling the pressure to buy things. After all, we have been subject to a relentless marketing campaign that started sometime in September, and in that time we've spent more money than at any other time of year. It would take a saint to resist.

Marketing is big business these days; it's all about targeting the right people in the right places with techniques and tricks that get ever more sophisticated. One campaign a year or two ago famously sought out the "coolest kid in the playground" in order to give them a computer game console for free. The reasoning was that if the coolest kid had it, then everyone else would want it too. Apparently it didn't work too well, but it was a bold move, that's for sure!

Gospel Teaching

What a refreshing change, then, to read of Jesus' birth. While today's experts are finding cleverer and cleverer ways to target the right person in the right place, God targets all the wrong people in the wrong places. Instead of delivering their child among their friends and family, among people who might know a bit about the mysterious circumstances of Jesus' conception, or have heard Mary tell of what the angel said, Mary and Joseph have to deliver the saviour of the world in a town that they don't know, in an anonymous inn, among people who haven't a clue that the one that all Israel has waited for for centuries is tucked up in an animal-food trough next door. It's true that this unexpected journey to the town of Jesus' ancestors fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies and would ultimately help to cement his messianic credentials, but at this early stage, it doesn't look too good.

And the shepherds. Really, not a good choice for spreading the word. Shepherds were right at the bottom of the pile – the lowest of the low; definitely not the coolest kids in the playground. Not much chance of anyone wanting to believe

or copy them. But God tells the greatest news that ever was, accompanied by angel choirs and celestial fireworks, right out in the fields where no one will see but a bunch of people no one will listen to. They'll just think they've been on the moonshine again. But then again, who better to tell than those who really need to hear the message: "goodwill and peace to all people; yes, you". The news of who Jesus was and what he was to mean to everyone didn't come to fruition for many years, but perhaps God did know what he was doing after all.

It tells what we really need to hear. As events started to unfold all those years ago in Bethlehem it didn't matter that, in terms of spreading the news, it was all in the wrong place and to the wrong people. God's concern was for those who were completely insignificant in everyday life. In God's eyes, the right people were the wrong ones. It just goes to show what kind of God we have: one who treasures the unloved, values the disregarded, listens to the lonely, lavishes attention on the ordinary and unsuccessful. This was the good news, and this is what the season of goodwill is all about.

Application

So as we enjoy the climax of that season of goodwill, and as we sit back a little and anticipate the adverts for summer holidays that will kick in about now, let's shake off for a moment all that advertising, all that marketing, and revel in the love of a God who sees the value in the most unvaluable people, and who is willing to spend the resources of heaven on bringing us close to him again, even if it's not good business. OK, so we've bought a lot of things. So be it. Let's enjoy the gifts given and received for what they are: not the fruit of a marketing campaign, but a symbol of another gift – a child born in a strange place, with just his mum and dad and a few shepherds who knew who he was – the greatest gift of all.