

Sunday Homily

THE BAPTISM OF CHRIST

9 JANUARY 2022

YEAR C

“His winnowing-fork is in his hand.”

Luke 3:17

Illustration

The story is told of a king called Midas, who was granted a wish. King Midas did not need any more power. His kingdom was at peace. He had a beautiful daughter. But however powerful you are, you can always find a use for more money. So, the story goes, King Midas made his wish – that everything he touched would turn to gold. Soon there were gold leaves on all his trees, and gold flowers in his garden. He was rich beyond his wildest dreams. But the foolishness of his wish began to dawn on him when he tried to eat his supper, and found the food turned to inedible gold in his mouth. And then his daughter ran in to say goodnight and... you can imagine the rest. Midas had to get his gift removed. He had learned that you have to be careful what you wish for, because you might just get it.

Gospel Teaching

The people of God wished for a Messiah. They had been wishing for a Messiah for many centuries, ever since their land began to be attacked and overrun by the armies of more powerful nations. They told the stories of the glory days of the great King David, and longed for a new David, even more gifted and powerful, to rule them wisely, to fight off their enemies, and to bring in God’s own reign of justice and peace. Their king would once again rule from Jerusalem, their wicked oppressors would be punished, and they would live in prosperity.

They had been warned. Their prophets had consistently told them that God’s judgement was not partial, that the day of reckoning would be an unpleasant experience as much for God’s own people as for their enemies. The coming of God’s reign would involve a judgement on injustice wherever it could be found. But through long centuries of foreign oppression the people had kept their hopes alive by looking always for the coming of God’s anointed king, and it was natural that they should imagine themselves restored and vindicated in the kingdom of God.

So John the Baptist seemed a likely candidate for Messiah. He preached repentance, and talked about judgement. He spoke of God’s coming to his people. Amidst all the fervour and unrest of Judaea under Roman occupation, the rumour began to spread. Perhaps this was the one. Perhaps he could be drawn from his desert preaching to lead the resistance to Rome. But, as Luke tells

us, John was quite clear that he was the forerunner rather than the Messiah. He talks about someone else, someone who is coming, someone more powerful, who will baptise with the Holy Spirit. Is this, then, the longed-for king, who will rescue his people and punish their enemies? Ah, but be careful what you wish for. Listen to how John describes him: "His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Like the prophets before him, John reminds his listeners that the coming of the kingdom of God is not an easy experience. The Messiah, when he comes, will challenge injustice wherever he finds it. The reign of God involves a purifying judgement, in which the fierce heat of God's justice will lay bare all human wrongdoing, so that it can be shorn of its power to harm.

So the Messiah finally appears, to be baptised by John and to begin his public ministry. In Luke's version, Jesus is just one of the crowd, involved in a mass baptism. There's no indication that the experience of God's commissioning is obvious to anyone but him. But from these quiet beginnings would come a revolution, a coming of God's kingdom in ways no one had expected, and in ways which would continue to reverberate till the end of time.

Application

It is easy for religious people to assume that God is on their side. But the story of Jesus should warn us that the reign of God is both much simpler and much more complicated than we think. Simpler, in that it straightforwardly demands justice. More complicated, in that we can never be sure on whom its judgement will fall. The man in the crowd steps out of the river to begin a revolution. One day, we are promised, it will come to its fulfilment. Do we wish for that day? We had better be careful what we wish for.