

Lectio Divina – Second Sunday of Advent Year B

Contexts

Mark's Gospel

- Composed between 65-70 CE
- Generally accepted as the first Gospel written.
- Authorship is unclear but possibly written by John Mark, the companion of Peter in Rome.
- Begins with the ministry of John the Baptist in the wilderness, then the Baptism of Jesus, then Jesus battling the forces of evil in the wilderness.
- First action of Jesus is to establish a community to establish the kingdom of God.
- Major work of this community is the work of healing and restoring God's right order, as opposed to the order of Rome, or the order established by the scribes and Pharisees, or religious and cultural norms of the time.
- Cleansing & healing stories restore people to their proper (rightful) place in the Kingdom and in human society (no longer outcasts, despised, unclean, etc).
- The right order of God's kingdom shatters and goes beyond the human and religious limitations placed on some of God's beloved sons and daughters.
- There is a characteristic starkness in Mark's Gospel – it is the shortest of the 4 canonical Gospels.
- Often the story is told by contrast – who is truly blind: the blind beggar or the seeing disciples, etc.

Mark 1:1-8 – things to notice

- The very first verses of Mark's Gospel – Immediately proclaims Jesus Christ as the Son of God. Introduces the Gospel, Good News Story of Jesus with the story of John the Baptist.
- It is written in the book of Isaiah – actually it's not - Look, I am going to end my messenger before you; he will prepare your way – is actually from Malachi 3:1. The rest is from Isaiah 40:3.
- The quote from the Prophet Isaiah links the Gospel and the first reading.
- In the Advent readings what is promised in the First Reading is fulfilled in the Gospel reading.
- Note the elements of the quote, arranged to suit Mark's purposes:
 - a messenger from God will come before you (the messiah)
 - he will prepare your (the messiah's) way.
 - A voice cries in the wilderness:
 - Prepare a way for the Lord,
 - make his paths straight
- John appears *in the wilderness*
- Proclaims a baptism for repentance (or: of conversion) – baptism is a reference to the various water rites of the Jews which as well as providing ordinary cleanliness (as in washing bodies or clothes) also has a spiritual significance of purification and blessing. For something or someone to be clean, purified and blessed it/they must be immersed completely in the water. This purification gave 'ritual purity' and freed the person or object from being a source of uncleanness to others or things. There was a particular water rite signifying conversion for converts from other religions. That is where we get the early Christian tradition of baptism by complete immersion, not just the pouring of water over the head – a practice which emerged only when babies began to be baptised, perhaps as late as 3rd century.
- Repentance/conversion – not about being sorry for sins but about a choice to turn around or turn back to God.
- for the forgiveness of sins – repentance/conversion brings about forgiveness.
- all Judea and all Jerusalem – an impossibly large number of people, come to John and are baptised by John confessing their sins.
- in the river Jordan – Israel's Euphrates – symbol of life and grace, flows through the holy land.

- about John: his clothing is reminiscent of Elijah's (2 Kings 1:8) and his preaching, like Elijah's, prepares the people for a manifestation of God. John's diet (locusts & wild honey) is probably more about ritual purity than asceticism.
- Someone is following me, someone who is more powerful than I – John's preaching is not about himself, but about one who is coming. Notice that he points to, but does not point out Jesus. In fact, in Mark's Gospel, John does not even seem to be aware that he has baptised Jesus. Jesus is just one among many others
- Not (even) fit to kneel down and undo the strap of his sandals – an expression of humility. Undoing the sandal strap was the task of a slave. Slaves knelt before masters, etc.
- I have baptised with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit. John's baptism is sacramental – a sign which points to the greater reality which Jesus brings: baptism with the Holy Spirit – not an external action but thorough-going Spirit-led conversion and immersion into the very life of God.

The Liturgical Context

The first reading is another beautiful reading from the second book of Isaiah often called the Book of Consolation. In the reading God speaks words of comfort and consolation, promising restoration, home-coming and the return of their shepherd-king. 'It is filled with the imagery of ancient imperial power. A royal highway will be prepared across the forbidding terrain, and the splendour of the divine ruler will be displayed for all to see. Messengers announce the good news from hilltop to hilltop.' (Break Open the Word) God's magnificent power is displayed in his acting as a shepherd: 'He is like a shepherd feeding his flock, gathering lambs in his arms, holding them against his breast and leading to their rest the mother ewes'.

Reflection

The magnificent first reading from the prophet Isaiah this weekend paints a picture of God coming to deliver his people. It begins with a tender proclamation of consolation and forgiveness. Great preparations take place for his arrival - hills are lowered, valleys filled in, a straight highway is made in the desert. The joyful news is shouted from the mountain tops.

God comes among his people not as a warrior-king with a frightening display of military power or with thunderbolts in his hands, but as a shepherd-king: feeding his flock, gathering the lambs in his arms, holding them against his breast and leading the mother ewes to rest. God's coming liberates and frees his people through tenderness and forgiveness.

That message is underlined in the Gospel story of John the Baptist who comes preparing the way for the Lord by proclaiming 'a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins'. According to Mark, a huge number of people come to John for baptism and to hear the proclamation of forgiveness – a moment of real conversion. John says that another will come, more powerful than himself, who will baptise, not with water, but with the Holy Spirit.

Our Advent readings help us realise God's profound love for us and his presence within us through the Holy Spirit. Knowing that God will always treat us with love and tender care helps us to turn again towards him and to trust in the depth of his mercy.

Our Advent journey is showing us how to prepare our hearts for a fresh discovery of God's presence in our lives; how to recognise the hidden presence of Jesus among and around us; how to turn around and face towards God with faith, hope and love; and how to be the living presence of Jesus in our moment of history.

The Season of Advent

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| 1. Stay Awake! | 3. Rejoice! |
| 2. Prepare! | 4. Receive! |