

2nd Sunday of Advent

Year B

Today we heard the opening of the Gospel of Mark, which introduces us to the two great figures that stand at the beginning of the Christian story: Jesus and John the Baptist. All four evangelists witness to the truth that you cannot tell the story of Jesus without first speaking about John the Baptist. It is the towering figure of John that introduces the adult Jesus in all the Gospels. John worked no miracles, held no office, belonged to no religious party. Yet his importance for Jesus was unique: he stands as the only religious leader that Jesus ever sought out and spoke of with deep affection and admiration. He is described as a voice crying in the wilderness, a large presence that dominates the emptiness of the wasteland.

John is a waiting figure, God's watchman, but his waiting is anything but passive. He does not go into the wilderness to sit in solitude and wait for the one who is to come; rather, the word of God invades his whole being, calling the people of Israel to a radical change of heart in readiness for the approach of the Lord. From the wilderness his voice has a powerful reach: it attracts a people who have grown accustomed to the silence of God, a people who are hungry to be nourished again by the word which they recognize to be God's own word.

It is worth noting that since the death of the last of the writing prophets, the voice of God had not been heard in the land. It was believed that the spirit of prophecy had been quenched and that God spoke only through "the echo of his voice." That long silence is broken when John speaks, and this is what gives John his unique authority. Through him the silence of God is ended: the spirit of prophecy is alive again as it was in the days of old. That is why, as Mark says, all Judaea and all Jerusalem make their way to John: in him the people discern the living word of God.

People respond to the revivalist preaching of John by confessing their sins to him and undergoing a baptism of repentance. To the word of God spoken through John, people give their own word to change their lives. Their change of heart is shown in their public baptism, which would have happened at one of the fords in the river Jordan. John's baptism marks a new beginning for them, a time of personal spiritual renewal, when they would aim themselves again at a life of fidelity to God.

The purpose of this energetic renewal movement is to prepare for the one who is to come. And we know that “one” to be Jesus of Nazareth. Although John has his own group of disciples, he does not make himself the focus of his prophetic witness; he does not claim that **he** is the way, the truth and the life. “Someone is following me, someone who is more powerful than I am, and I am not fit to kneel down and undo the strap of his sandals.” John understands his own place within the larger context of God’s plan and this frees him to defer to the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. Jesus’ greatness does not diminish John’s importance; John is important precisely because of who Jesus is.

John’s way is a challenge to all of us: to foster the greatness in others without feeling threatened about the value of our own contribution; to be free to celebrate the importance of others because we have a sense of our own worth and value before God. John manages to do all this, and not surprisingly, Jesus will return the compliment when he speaks about John to the crowds, telling them that there is no greater mother’s son than John the Baptist.

As the relationship between John and Jesus teaches us, the generosity in recognising the goodness in others can help them call out the good that is in ourselves. When that happens, there are no losers.