

Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> December 2017: SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT. YR B.

Readings: Is 40:1-11; Ps 85:1-2,8-13; 2 Peter 3:8-15a

Gospel: Mark 1:1-8

**“John the Baptist preached repentance and baptised the people, in preparation for the one who would baptise with the Holy Spirit.”**

The Pope took a philosophy professor (an atheist at that) out fishing on a large lake. As they drifted on the still lake, the philosopher accidentally dropped an oar and watched it float away. The pontiff stepped out of the boat, walked across the water to the oar, grabbed it and walked back to the boat. The next day at the university, a colleague asked the philosopher if he had enjoyed fishing with the Pope. "It was okay, but would you believe that guy can't swim?"

**May I speak in the Name of the One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.**

Today's Gospel is taken from the beginning of Mark. Unlike Luke and Matthew, Mark does not include any details of Jesus' birth. Instead Mark begins with the appearance of John the Baptist in the desert. On this the Second Sunday of Advent, we are invited to reflect upon the role of John the Baptist, who prepared the way for Jesus and the salvation that he would bring to us.

Mark's description of the appearance of John the Baptist highlights John's continuity with the Jewish prophetic tradition. Mark combines quotations from the Old Testament books of Malachi, Isaiah, and Exodus. Mark's description of John as an ascetic, living in the desert, clothed in camel hair, and eating locusts and wild honey, is reminiscent of the description of the prophet Elijah found in Second Kings. The people of Judea and Jerusalem flock to him, listening to his message of repentance and forgiveness; they also come to him to be baptised. Mark's Gospel is clear, however, that John the Baptist's role is only to prepare the way for another who will come, one who is greater than John.

Many scholars believe that the Gospels reflect the tension that likely existed between followers of John the Baptist and disciples of Jesus. Each of the four Evangelists report on John's preaching and baptising, and they each emphasise the importance of Jesus' baptism by John.

John the Baptist's life was fuelled by one burning passion - to point others to Jesus Christ and to the coming of his kingdom. Who is John the Baptist and what is the significance of his message for our lives? Scripture tells us that John was *filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb* (Luke 1:15, 41) by Christ himself, whom Mary had just conceived by the Holy Spirit.

When Mary visited her cousin Elizabeth John leaped in her womb as they were filled with the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:41). The fire of the Spirit dwelt in John and made him the forerunner of the coming Messiah. John was led by the Spirit into the wilderness prior to his ministry where he grew in the word of God and was tested in preparation for his prophetic mission.

The four Gospels explain that John was sent to preach in preparation for another. In the Gospel of Luke, the question is raised as to whether John the Baptist was himself the Messiah. Just as in today's Gospel, however, John speaks quite explicitly that the Messiah was to come after him.

In today's Gospel we hear John the Baptist contrast his baptism of repentance with the baptism that Jesus will inaugurate. John says that he has baptised with water, but that the one who is to come will baptise with the Holy Spirit. John's baptism was not yet a Christian baptism, but a preparation for the Sacrament of Baptism through which sins are forgiven and the gift of the Holy Spirit is received.

In John, he broke the prophetic silence of previous centuries when he began to speak the word of God to the people of Israel. His message was similar to the message of the Old Testament prophets who chided the people of God for their unfaithfulness and who tried to awaken true repentance in them. Among a people unconcerned with the things of God, it was his work to awaken their interest, unsettle them from their complacency, and arouse in them enough good will to recognise and receive Christ when he came.

Jesus tells us that John the Baptist was *more than a prophet* (Luke 7:26). John was the *voice* of the Consoler who is coming (John 1:23; Isaiah 40:1-3). He completed the cycle of prophets begun by Elijah (Matthew 11:13-14).

What the prophets had carefully searched for and angels longed to see, now came to completion as John made the way ready for the coming of the Messiah, God's Anointed Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. With John the Baptist, the Holy Spirit begins the restoration to the human race of the "**divine likeness**", prefiguring what would be achieved with and in the Lord Jesus.

John's baptism was for repentance - turning away from sin and taking on a new way of life according to God's word.

Our baptism in Jesus Christ by water and the Spirit results in a new birth and entry into God's kingdom as his beloved sons and daughters (John 3:5). The Lord Jesus comes to baptise each one of us in his Holy Spirit so that we may walk in his truth and holiness and radiate the joy of the Gospel to all we meet. God's word has power to change and transform our lives so that we may be lights that point others to Jesus.

John the Baptist is presented to us as a model during Advent. Like John the Baptist, we too are called to give testimony to the light and truth of Christ. We, too, are called upon to prepare a way for the Lord. Like John the Baptist, we are messengers in service to one who is greater than we are. Our Baptism commissions us to call others to life as disciples of Jesus.

Amen.