

Advent 2
9/12/2007

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 11:1 - 10
Psalm 72
Romans 15:4 - 13
Matthew 3:1 - 12

A shoot from Jesse's stump

In Advent the prophets wake us up to hope in what God has promised. Last week, through the symbol of Jerusalem, Isaiah offered us a majestic vision of renewed life. He does so again today, but this time his key image is of a Spirit filled King who emerges from the line of David, son of Jesse, a messianic figure who is clothed in the regalia of faith rather than war. This King is not a warlord or totalitarian oppressor of the people who seeks power or his own glory. He is gifted with intellect and practical skills. But he does more than right wrongs. He is a person of deep faith who rules according to the strength, wisdom and justice of God. His reign of Godly rule is accompanied by a radical transformation of relationships in society, especially with respect to the poor. While this is a basis for thoughts on social policy, in the second part of Isaiah's vision, the transformation extends to the realm of nature. Animals normally antagonistic to one another will live in harmony. Lions will become vegetarians! And the snake, the traditional symbol of evil and temptation, will no longer be a threat, so that children may play safely near its nest. This idyllic imagery of paradise regained is not just for Israel, it is for the whole world. Isaiah's vision proclaims a deep foundational change in the structure of things, which affects all people, a vision celebrated in the Psalm.

Isaiah's vision of a coming king drew on the ideal version of all that was wise and good in the past. But the image of the stump of Jesse suggests a tree that had been cut down or broken off and, humanly speaking, had no more life in it. But this stump was not without possibilities, for where all hope was thought to be lost the life giving Spirit of God was at work.

In the long haul of Israel's history with its many breakdowns in faith and failures of leadership Isaiah's grand vision of a renewed Creation may have languished for a long time. But when John the Baptist appeared in the desert, the memory of God who promised to comfort the people gained new currency.

At one level it seems inappropriate for John to show up before Christmas. But his preaching forms a bridge between the infancy stories, which we celebrate at Christmas, and Jesus' Baptism and the commencement his ministry, ending in the Cross. John comes to us now because he is the herald of God's new work. And it is the same God who is with us in the birth, at the Baptism and on the cross. This is the child through whom God willed to lead us all to become children of God. John's question is: are we ready for what God is doing here?

John's message was one of repentance. We know the word well and in the hands of old fashioned hellfire preachers it has often been distorted to mean 'stop being

naughty' or something like that. But repentance comes from a Hebrew root that means *return* or *turn you life around*.

Turn you life around! Why did John call for this and why did people flock to him? He came from the desert, he looked like a prophet, and he sounded like a prophet, and in Israel there had been nothing like this for 200 years or more. He was a sign of change and movement from God's side. Because of him there was renewed hope that the fullness of God's power and presence would be seen and acknowledged by all. What John knew was that it was not him, but there was one on his way to meet the people in whom a new future was on offer from God.

Confronted by John, a depressed and occupied people dared to remember the classic visions of the prophets. Their long abandoned hope for renovated social life and a transformed creation were dusted off. They accepted his invitation to be baptised as a sign they were ready to turn and receive the God who was turning towards them.

We all know what use some preachers make of the call to repentance, and John is no exception. His most negative and judgemental remarks are directed to the religious leaders of his day –the brood of vipers who, in being certain of their own status and purity co-opted God for their own purposes, poisoned the faith of others, and perpetuated injustice amongst the poor. The religious leaders should have known better, and John called them to bear fruit worthy of a new life that was truly based on faith in God. But having said that, the urgency of his message was not grounded in fear, or the resentment that wished only to damn his opposition. His call for change was founded on the certainty that God had come near. This may inspire fear and trembling in us, but the truth is God has come near for our good. That is why the Advent mood is one of heightened expectation and deepening joy. In all his harshness John rightly stands before us at this time, for he is the signal that the relentless, searching love of God is still on the move towards us. At a time of emptiness, despair and dysfunctional religion John's message is one of hope. God's will still is that all people might know justice and fullness of life.

John was not talking about himself. The key here is that the green shoot rising from the ancient Jewish stump of Jesse was his cousin and what he brought was for all people. Like all births his affected the world. But, after a life of demonstrating what it means to live expressing the reign of God, the thing that has really come to mark him out is the way he died. On the day of his death, a cross, was raised up, and it has come to represent the inner secret of his life lived for God. It has become a signal to all the world of what empowers the Kingdom of God: sacrificial, self-giving love. This cross of wood was once part of a living tree. Now dead and carrying death, through him it became a sign of new life, for us and all people.

Despite its benefits, a world over familiar with corporate signatures does not find here a preferred image. But for those who have learned to understand this signal, raised up from the among the family of Jesse, it has become a sign of the deepest hope there is: that God is with us, and with us for our good.