

Advent 2
4/12/2011

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 40:1-11
Psalm 80
2 Peter 3:8-15a
Mark 1:1-8

A new heaven and a new earth: a place where righteousness is at home

The figure of John the Baptist looms large in Christian scripture and liturgy. He appears twice in Advent, and again at Epiphany with the Baptism of Jesus. Later in the Year of Mark we read the story of his beheading. The historic churches of the East and West have no less than four holy days in his honour. All this for one whom the New Testament is at pains to point out was not the “One who is to come”.

One reason John gets so much attention is just that: the New Testament writers wanted to make sure John was not regarded as the Messiah. Another explanation is that as the announcer of an event he is just as significant as the event itself. This idea lived in late mediaeval and early modern thought. For example it meant the bugler of an army was just as responsible for the action of war as the soldiers. Even though he carried no weapon, his trumpet instigated and directed all that followed. [*Master Alciat's Riddles* p 42, 234]. John's role as the announcer of the Christ event means there can be no telling the story without him.

All four Gospels associate John with the messenger of Isaiah whose words to Jerusalem in Chapter 40 told of a new work of God that marked the end the people's exile in Babylon. Isaiah's first word was comfort. In Latin it means “to give strength” and speaks of assurance, well being and solidarity. The term of suffering is over. God is acting tenderly for the people to open up a new possibility of life.

A new road is to be built in the desert, the purpose of which is that God will move in triumphal procession from Babylon to Jerusalem. It may be that here Isaiah has in mind Babylonian cities that were built with grand ceremonial approaches along which on special days images of the local god would be processed. Everything spoke of triumphal macho style grandiosity. But Isaiah is not thinking like that. His imagery is governed by thoughts of gentleness and tenderness. Rather than a grand procession replete with all the pomp of church and state, with slaves sweating to carry a monstrous statue of a mute deity, in reality the sign that God's promise lasts forever would be a ragged bunch of exiles on a journey home through the wilderness. Divine strength would be displayed in weakness, divine majesty would be revealed in dusty humility.

In Isaiah a messenger is despatched whose Hebrew name could be translated “gospeller”. His role was to announce Good News, for example, of a battle won. His word to Jerusalem was: “Here is your God!” God was present in the exiles' journey home. But that journey did not begin with Israel's faith. Its origin was in the decree of God who chose to work in unexpected ways to give new life and strength to the people.

The announcements of Isaiah and John were for people in hopeless situations. They were in exile from their homeland, and in exile within their homeland. But there was a deeper exile: it was from faith in the God whose promises had been so real to their forebears, but which now seemed without point or value.

People were riveted by John's message and flocked to hear him. His words tapped into a deep yearning for God where no sign of God could be seen. We would hope, wistfully, for such preaching today. John called for repentance, which means to turn around and allow God to do what we cannot do for ourselves. For self-made people this is not a hopeful sign. But John's call for repentance is the first note sounded in the Good News that Mark sets forth as he announces that the one who is to come the long awaited but hidden reign of God has begun to dawn in the world. Mark writes to show reader and listener that John the Baptist's summons marks the hinge on which history turns, and it occurred in Jesus of Nazareth. This is the deepest change possible. Despite what it seems, the promises of God are still active for us.

This has been a big year at every level of life and it continues to be so. The Message of Advent calls us back from all the distractions to focus on the central point. The promises of God still stand. God still desires good things for us, and through John, calls us to turn and receive them.

The Letter of Peter was written to those who were being scoffed at for living in hope and had begun to lose heart. Peter reminds his audience that God does not work according to our dates or plans. The colourful description of the end of the world he refers to gives us less trouble than it might have done before nuclear weaponry and climate change came on the scene. It is an old fashioned way of saying that God, who created the world and raised Jesus from the dead still has the power to transform life. Suffering love has not been defeated, and suffering love will come, suddenly and in unexpected ways to fulfil the promise of life with God. There will one day be a renewed world and "righteousness will have a home on the earth" [2 Pet 3:14]. This is a deep and lovely thought. In Advent we take a fresh grasp of this hope and give ourselves to live in the expectation of it, trusting that God will be God for us.
