

Second Sunday in Advent

"I am sure that God, who began this good work in you, will carry it on until it is finished."

Sirach 27, 30 - 28, 7

John went throughout the whole region of the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Matthew 18, 21-35



In his book *Table Talk*, Jay Cormier tells a charming story of a rather unusual man who used to frequent a large shopping mall in the weeks leading up to Christmas. While he had a somewhat glassy stare, there was a kindness and sincerity about him that attracted people rather than turning them away. He would position himself in the central part of the mall, near a fountain and set about stopping the passing shoppers, asking them why they were spending so much money on presents and food, or enquiring why they were so obsessed about what he called "this tinselled holiday". At times he would offer comments like: "We like our Christmas with a lot of sugar, don't we?", "Christmas is about hope and love, and that can be a struggle, don't you think?", "Ever think of seeking forgiveness and reconciliation from family and friends who have become distant?", "Why not let the spirit of the Christ Child embrace every season of the year?" Most of those whom he stopped nodded in agreement with him, as they put a tighter grip on their bags. Some even turned and went home, while others went and bought a toy or an item of clothing for a Christmas charity. Some admitted that they dropped into a nearby church for a quiet prayer. Sometimes, the man made derogatory comments about the tasteless decorations or the insipid, canned music being piped through the mall. At other times, he would stop the resident Santa and embarrass him by asking pointed questions about the real Christmas story. When he was not to be seen in the shopping mall, he could be found rummaging through the large rubbish bins outside in search of food discarded by the fast-food outlets inside.

Though this man was viewed as an eccentric, he wasn't really harming anyone. However, the mall management decided that he had to be excluded on the grounds that he was "disturbing the Christmas spirit of shoppers". Security officers were directed to escort him from the premises.

That story prompted me to ask where John the Baptist, the focus of today's gospel reading, would seek out an audience if he were to make a return. I suspect that he would head for the places that attract the crowds. So, he would most likely favour large shopping centres, stand outside sporting venues and concert halls, and set up his loud-speaker in the parks where people come to walk. His appearance and dress would disturb, and his words would surely unsettle anyone who stopped to listen. Moreover, his message would be unpopular, for who wants to hear a call to repentance? The baptism he offered was all about calling people to a change of heart, to a conversion of spirit, and a change in attitude to life and to other people. In a very real sense John proclaimed what is the central message of Christmas - God coming among humanity in the person of Jesus, God becoming one of us out of love for human kind.

Yet, all too often, because of our busyness and preoccupation with things of little importance, we fail to recognise God present among us. We fail to make room for Jesus present for people like the ones in the mall, for those who look different, for those who have been alienated by society or forced to flee their homelands.

The very same Word that came to John in the desert is offered to us in the emptiness of our hearts. If we can welcome the Word, we will begin to act in ways that will open the way for Christ to be reborn once again in the places where we live and work.

Caryll Houselander was a laywoman, poet and mystic who lived in the UK during the first half of the 20th century. Her reflection on the Advent season is appropriate for us as we ponder the significance of these few weeks leading up to Christmas:

“When a woman is carrying a child, she develops a certain instinct of self-defence. It is not selfishness; it is not egoism. It is an absorption into the life within, a folding of self like a little tent around the child’s frailty, a God-like instinct to cherish and some day to bring forth the life. A closing upon it like the petals of a flower closing upon the dew that shines in its heart. This is precisely the attitude we must have to Christ, the Life within us, in the Advent of our contemplation. We could scrub the floor for a tired friend, or dress a wound for a patient in a hospital, or lay the table and wash up for the family; but we shall not do it in martyr spirit or with the worst spirit of self-congratulation, of feeling that we are making ourselves more perfect, more unselfish, more positively kind.

We shall do it for just one thing, that our hands make Christ’s hands in our life, that our service may let Christ serve through us, that our patience may bring Christ’s patience back to the world. By his own will Christ was dependent on Mary during ‘Advent’: he was absolutely helpless; he could go nowhere but where she chose to take him; he could not speak; her breathing was his breath; his heart beat in the beating of her heart. Today Christ is dependent on us. This dependence of Christ lays a great trust upon us. During this tender time of Advent we must carry him in our hearts to wherever he wants to go, and there are many places to which he may never go unless we take him.” (Caryll Houselander, *The Reed of God*, first published 1944, republished in 2006 by Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, Indiana)

Perhaps we could reawaken in our lives the true meaning of Advent by:

- Making room for God’s Spirit by taking time for quiet reflection
- Making room for the poor and needy through our generosity
- Making room for those we are distant from us by reaching out in reconciliation
- Making room for strangers and refugees by engaging them in conversation
- Making room for tolerance by encountering those we’re wary of

God has already begun a good work in us. Are we willing to let God work on the finishing touches?

In 2018, in the sixth year of the Pontificate of Francis, the second year of the Presidency of Donald Trump, at a time when Prime Minister May was negotiating a satisfactory Brexit deal, the Word of the Lord was spoken to...to you and me.

Are we able to hear it?