

Advent 3 2018

Zephaniah 3: 14-20, Canticle- The Song of Isaiah, Luke 3: 7-18.

How are you travelling through Advent? In the first week the theme was judgement. We were reminded will be called to account!

Last week Mother Roxanne spoke of the hospitality of God. What does hospitality mean in the context of today's gospel? What are we invited to hear?

This week we are reminded of the power and purpose of the Holy Spirit. John came to proclaim the day of the Lord's coming. He labelled his contemporaries a brood of vipers! His accusation calls out the emptiness of pharisaic legalism that falls short of God's call to genuine heart-felt repentance and the life-giving goodness that can flow from that state. Any one of us may assume that acknowledging our faults and weaknesses is sufficient to discharge our guilt. In the power of the Spirit, John sees that more is required, and that includes of each of us.

John's preaching in the desert sits over a web of threads from the older testament that foretell the coming of the judgement of God. The voice is prophetic, and it is directed at the day to day living of the hearers. Being part of the group that identifies as *the people of God* is not enough. Action is required.

Reading this week has taken me far and wide and it is Brandan Byrne that has provided a fruitful theme. He talks of the tension between the specialness and ordinariness in the coming of Jesus. He surveys the birth narrative in early parts of Luke's gospel, and he notes all that is unfamiliar in the divine world. Annunciation by an angel, visions of angelic choirs, and Zechariah and Mary breaking into canticles. Today we see hear of another man out of the ordinary. Dressed in camel skins baptising in a river, and calling some of the assembled vipers, and threatening divine retribution.

If we were to see such a prophet on the street, or near the Yarra making similar claims what would we think? Drugs, mental illness head down and hurry past.

In these weeks of Advent, you and I are invited into the space between the marvellous and the ordinary. It is not an easy space to enter or inhabit. It **is** out of the ordinary. I venture to say that it is a place of spiritual growth. A middle place of synthesis, between thesis and antithesis. This new place can be creative and frightening because it is uncertain. Finding our reality is our challenge as we leave church today. Is it the spiritual reality that goes with you, or is it the ordinary world that dominates? This is my daily struggle as a priest and a teacher. Living in either one reality or the other, the spiritual or the ordinary is probably the easiest option but what does the Spirit call me to? As I pondered this problem, I was reminded of Harry Potter and his friends at a train station looking platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ to take them to Hogwarts. The entrance appeared as a brick wall and they must take a dramatic dash at it, in order to force their way into the alternative reality. Perhaps we need to do the same.

For each of us, the reality of Emanuel; God with us is, a state we need to work at. The crowds who came to be Baptized by John were told that the axe was lying at the root of the trees ready to cut down what was not bearing good fruit. These people asked John “what then should we do”? They were given direct teaching on ethical behaviour. They should share. How does John’s imperative sit with us? How do we find, and then live out of the place between the marvellous and the ordinary that will enable us to live ethical lives of peace and generosity with God?

Advent is a season that can highlight the difference between the spiritual and the ordinary, as we prepare to lay down our year’s work, and preparation for Christmas gathers momentum. We are probably all dashing between the ordinary and the spiritual.

Recently, I have read of how God is with us at the point of our greatest distress and exhaustion, because it is the place of our least resistance. Too tired and overwhelmed by the ordinariness of life, we can surrender to God. The Spirit awaits.

Running in tandem with the prophetic voices of judgement Advent, are life- giving images. In John's words one more powerful than he is coming and will baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire. This is the same Spirit into which we were Baptized. Unbelievable really. So, we come full circle to the theme of hospitality of God which underpins Luke's gospel. God's promises have been fulfilled in Jesus, and we inhabit the not-yet fulfillment of the end time. We have partial sight and understanding and total vulnerability. From our vantage point we look both back and forward, and struggle with the issue of our reality. But it is a generous and hospitable God that holds time in his hands.

What positive joy we have heard in the daily office this week from Isaiah! What a gift are the words from Zephaniah today. The Lord is in your midst... he will rejoice over you, with gladness he will renew you in his love. Life-giving images abound.

So, we find ourselves in that place of tension. A call to repentance, and the promise of joy brought through the birth and life of Jesus. Byrne explains that we all live on a divine promise and that we look for the completion of that promise in the reality of our lives and our communities. We face disappointments when hopes and expectations don't meet the reality that we see.

You and I need to own the reality of the struggle between the spiritual and the ordinary. Fulfillment comes when we find the conjunction between God's promises and the reality of the ordinary. That place of joining comes through grace and the Spirit. We can't achieve it in our own power.

I pray that the beauty of words, music and images of Advent may lull us into the place of surrender that pleads; come Lord Jesus, come.

Byrne, Brendan. *The Hospitality of God*. St Paul's Publications NSW Australia, 2000. pp 31-38.

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