



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

## **2nd Sunday of Advent - Year A**

***St John the Baptist, pray for us***

*Readings: Isaiah 11: 1-10, Ps 71, Romans 15: 4-9, Matthew 3: 1-12*

Sitting at lunch with a group of fellow clergy recently – we’d just had a big session on the latest Papal document – we were ruminating on the last year. ‘Well’, said one wag, ‘thank God the Year of Mercy is finally over. Now we can get back to being our usual unpleasant selves.’

Behind this comment was not criticism but the awareness that, while the year had produced many blessings, it was in danger of collaborating with the caricature of the Church as breaking the habits of a lifetime as a negative spoilsport usually at odds with the culture and the best interests of Man. The truth is that every year of the Church’s history has been a year of mercy because the Church exists to bring the mercy of God in Christ to all who will receive it. That is the Gospel. It does no harm to accentuate that from time to time and ensure that we are, to quote the old cliché, singing from the same hymn sheet. What we must not do is to topple over into an interpretation of mercy as a kind of emotional incontinence, a sentimentalisation of the sacrifice of Christ, a cost-free salvation that requires no response.

Behind the concept of mercy lies the idea of judgement. We would not need God's mercy unless we had been convicted of sin. Our recognition of that leads us to owning up, confessing and repenting. We seek the beautiful clemency of the judge and we are not disappointed.

To a man unconvinced of his need of mercy, unconvicted by his sin, the idea of the Church bleating 'mercy' is anywhere from absurd to embarrassing. It is why the Gospel always begins with a call to repentance, an invitation to turn back to God, an exhortation to engage with the ultimate reality and the truth of who we are.

Somehow, somewhere along the line, we have stalled in this prerequisite duty to our fellow man. Afraid lest people think we are simply being smug and self-righteous and 'judgemental', we choke on the call to repentance. And this is where our experience of the Year of Mercy should have helped us recover our nerve. We are not calling Man, the individual, the community, the nation to repentance because we are perfect but because we ourselves have experienced the wonderful liberation of God's mercy in our own lives and want that gift for all. Our spur is generosity not judgement – that belongs to God alone.

In the confessional one of the prayers I use in response to the opening request for a blessing is: 'May the Lord be in your heart and on your lips that you may truly confess your sins and lay them at the foot of the Cross of Jesus and receive the liberating mercy of His Blood shed for you.'

That is our experience. Slaves to sin we are set free by the Passover Blood of the Lamb. Heirs of mortality we are invited into the Divine life of eternity. Failures in love we are embraced by the reconciling love of the

Father and invited to the Feast. But first we have to turn to Him. So the Gospel begins and so must our witness. It is why, on this second Sunday in Advent, we find ourselves on the banks of the Jordan River in the company of this terrifying ascetic prophet, John Baptist.

Mark what happens. Overwhelmed by his holiness and seriousness, the people of Jerusalem and Judaea make their way to him to be baptised for the remission of their sins. Ordinary people turn out and turn back to God in response to his call of the truth. Why? He speaks the truth. He resonates integrity.

Then along come the professional religious, Pharisees and Sadducees. To them John is not kind. There is no flannel. *'You brood of vipers. What made you flee from the wrath that is to come? If you are genuinely penitent then produce the fruit. Don't rely on your heritage.'*

Being religious doesn't give you even a day pass to Heaven. Turning to God is the only way. I do not advise the use of similar language in our evangelism but the message is the same. Tell ordinary people the truth and don't think our religiosity removes our need for regular profound repentance. An impenitent Church cannot preach repentance. Only if we know ourselves to be grateful redeemed sinners will we truly be able to share the knowledge and hope of God's mercy with others.

Towards the end of the great prayer of the Roman Canon (Eucharistic Prayer I) in the Mass we pray, *'To us also your servants who, though sinners, hope in your abundant mercies, graciously grant some share and fellowship with your holy Apostles and Martyrs....'* It is always for me a moment of trepidation and self-assessment because the first name in the

list is John the Baptist. How can I pray to stand in the company of this intimidating giant of the Faith? Perhaps I could blend in the back of the crowd around him. This forerunner of Jesus, this preparer of the Way, this preacher of repentance, this longer for God's mercy for his people. I am not worthy and neither are you. But our task is the same. Our language may be less severe, our courage fainter, our commitment shabby in comparison but the task is the same. We have, in our generation, to prepare the Way of the Lord, to open the highway to Jesus and that means preaching repentance from penitent hearts. That means proclaiming the loving mercy of God from hearts that know that love and want for others not judgement but mercy, a turning back to the loving Saviour of the world who alone can rescue us from sin and death. It is Jesus alone who can do this and we, as his heralds, proclaim this that truth.

The Advent preparation is for the coming of Christ now, then and at the end of time. St. John the Baptist pray for us.

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