

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent (B)

10<sup>th</sup> December 2023

'Confession as Advent necessity'

Is 40: Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people ... Ps 84: a voice that speaks of peace,  
peace for His people      2Pet 3: live holy and saintly lives while you wait ...  
Mk 1: 1–8: *'A voice that cries in the wilderness.'*

We began the new church year last weekend, didn't we, with the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent? But we didn't start again at the beginning of the Gospel: instead we heard Jesus towards the end of Mark's Gospel saying, "*stay awake, ... be alert*" — longing & waiting for Him to come: come at Christmas, and come again at the end of time.

But today we get back to the beginning, right to the start: the opening verses of Mark's Gospel; and St Mark doesn't hang around — straight to the point: v. 1 = the Good News . . . Jesus Christ . . . the Son of God; vv. 2 & 3 = Isaiah prophesied a messenger; v. 4 = St John the Baptist appeared. You can't get much more direct, can you? Some say that's because St Mark's Gospel was a transcript of St Peter's preaching in Rome. Certainly to anyone hearing the Gospel for the first time, it is a powerful opening to captivate the listener: "*... so it was that John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*"

John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus — even the pagan historians of the time say how he attracted the crowds. He's like a pace-setter in an important race, he gets the runners all up to speed before the record breaker comes into his own; John the Baptist got the people thinking about the importance of having sins forgiven before Jesus appeared; and he could then drop out of the race. That's why we hear of John now, in the second week of Advent. Last week we re-affirmed our waiting in faith; but this week we've got to get down to the job, actually getting our hearts ready for celebrating Jesus's coming — what's John the Baptist's answer to that? "*A baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*" We've already had our baptism, renounced sin and grasped the Good News — we know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and we want to live up to that with all our hearts. We're running in the race of faith with Jesus as our leader, but things do get in the way. We put obstacles in the path, we trip up, we trip up others, but John is helping us keep in the race and shouts out: "*prepare a way for the Lord, make His paths straight.*" Now, as Catholics, we know that there's only really one way to clear the way,

to help us run more smoothly with Jesus, to shed the loads which weigh on us and hold us back, and that's the sacrament of reconciliation, confession.

I expect that we all have lots to try and fit in in the next couple of weeks before Christmas Day. And we might be rushing around between now and then: the final essays and assignments of term; flights or trains to book to go home, perhaps; shopping for presents to be done for our loved ones; cards to be bought/written/sent/given; friends to see on a night out, or a pre-Christmas dinner (or two) before we part for the vacation ... busy busy busy! Apparently, where St John the Baptist set up his ministry on the banks of the Jordan River was also a busy, hectic place — it was a *ford*, where the road east from out of Jerusalem would allow a crossing of the river: a place of much hustle and bustle, then, naturally, people coming and going, no doubt in a hurry, with much to do. *This* is where St John the Baptist set up his place for preaching to all those who passed that way. No wonder, then, that he was heard by so many, as he came to be that prophesied “*voice crying in the wilderness, prepare a way for the Lord.*” Declaring forcefully to the traders,

bankers, merchants and pilgrims that came to cross the ford, that they needed to change their lives, and experience his baptism of water, no doubt he had a lot of shrug offs, “I’m too busy today”! John the Baptist also cries out to us in these two middle Sundays of Advent — this week and next week — that we are to take him seriously, that we are not to pass him by, but hear him as the final prophet of the Messiah’s coming. Along with that Old Testament prophet, Isaiah, from 7½ centuries earlier, John the Baptist is one of the great figures of Advent, and we would do well to heed him. Think of how all those who ignored John the Baptist were missing a crucial message — Jesus is coming, Salvation is near, Baptism in the Holy Spirit is around the corner. Those who ignored John the Baptist were ignoring *God’s very own Son* appearing in their midst. And we also must not ignore the appeal of John the Baptist in this season. In fact, today — this 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday — is a very good day to be reminded about what the Church gives us Advent for ... a time of real spiritual preparation. Before it does indeed get too late in Advent for us to fit in what is so important in our Catholic life as Christians: to ask for, and to receive, the forgiveness

of our sins.

The Church makes it patently obvious that this is a ‘must’ in Advent, for we are given the figure of St John the Baptist two Sundays running, in the heart of the season, the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Sundays of Advent. The message of John isn’t given us just for us to contemplate as a historical event, that John was the forerunner of the Messiah and happened to do this: be in the wilderness, preach, and call the people out to the Jordan for Baptism. No — we’re given these two Sundays of John the Baptist so that we can *hear and act on* his message — how to get ready for Jesus the Messiah — and respond to it with all our hearts, through seeking that forgiveness of our sins.

Confession — the Sacrament of Reconciliation, or the Sacrament of Penance, or the Sacrament of Forgiveness ... whatever you wish to call it — is a beautiful treasure at the heart of the Church. We know how often Jesus, filled with love & compassion, said to those who approached Him for mercy, “*Your sins are forgiven ... go in peace and sin no more.*” To approach Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins is not a matter of trying to convince Him to forgive you; but it

is something which He, as God, is just waiting to do, if you are sorry, want to change, and come to ask.

People sometimes argue, well, why need we come to Confession? If God is present everywhere, then surely if I ask Him to forgive me, then He will hear and know it, and will see if in my heart I am genuinely sorry? Yes, in a way that is true ... but what He asks of us as proof of that sorrow, is that we come to say it openly and in words, in the Sacrament that He has given His Church. Confession is not some round-about way of getting forgiven; it is the *direct* route. If we are truly sorry, then we make an effort. If we are truly sorry for having hurt another person, we say so, out loud. We *could* just try and behave better and hope that they will see in our change of attitude that we are sorry for something we did ... but that is not what we normally experience as human beings, is it? What we like to do ... what we *need* to do, both psychologically and spiritually, is to say sorry, out loud, to the person ... and then to have the relief and joy of hearing those words, “I forgive you.”

It’s the same in Confession. We *could* just say it to the air, ‘God, forgive me.’ We could even mean it

wholeheartedly ... but in general we cannot know for sure that we are forgiven without the Sacrament. It's not appropriate for our human nature. We are bodily creatures, and the Sacraments all use physical expressions in order to engage our whole selves ... as vehicles for what is happening spiritually. Jesus extends His forgiveness to us, in the Church, by calling us to Reconciliation. It is His grace, His sacrament, His mercy that we can experience, and know that we truly are forgiven.

Please, if you are in the habit of putting off Confession, don't put it off any longer. Don't have worries about the sacrament. The longer you leave going, the harder it is to come back, but any time is a good time. Don't worry if you've forgotten the words — any priest will happily help you through. Don't worry if you aren't always clear what's right and wrong; that can be discussed even within the time of confession. You don't need to come to me; you can seek Confession elsewhere if you wish: another parish, another priest ... Times here that remain for Advent Confessions are: Me (12.15–1.15pm today, and 6–7pm today) / Fr Ivano (tomorrow 6–7pm) / also on request (just ask or e-mail me).

It worries me that all too many Catholics today simply neglect totally their spiritual need for Confession. Let's be different; let's be a student body, a Chaplaincy, that really values (*treasures!*) Confession, that knows we are sinners, and seeks forgiveness often. Let's heed John the Baptist's urgent cry, and make our Advent preparation properly and completely, in Reconciliation.

*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.*

*Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned ...*

(Isaiah 40:1–2)