

Change

We have reached the third Sunday of Advent, and while last Sunday we heard Zechariah rejoicing in the birth of John “*the one who will go before the Lord to prepare a way for him,*” today we actually hear John himself speaking. And what we hear is tough, harsh, and even a touch frightening. Several authors have described John as the bridge between the Old and the New Covenant. And today he sounds very much a prophet lambasting the people. How does this reading today make you feel? I admit, it is such a style of proclamation that I haven’t preached on it too much.

What John is talking about is CHANGE. And change is not something we humans are good at, even though we do it all the time, even when we don’t realise this: did you know that our outer layer of skin (= epidermis) completely changes about every 27 days? It doesn’t ask us if we like the idea, it just happens. Change is a normal part of life and having agreed that Advent is all about the Kingdom as promised by God in Jesus, naturally there is change involved. And thank God for that! The Kingdom has to be very different from the reality of the world, be in the times of John, or in our times. And given what we have heard about in our country this week, I do not want the Kingdom to look like our present reality. Do you?

When the Advent Candle was lit a few moments ago, it spoke to us of the *Advent God of flourishing life for all*, and that is what John is proclaiming (in his particular style), and what Jesus speaks about when teaching us of the Kingdom. And a reality of flourishing life for all is not possible without change. What happens when we hear this reading? On one hand John accusing those who come for baptism but have no intention of a change of lifestyle – he calls them *brood of vipers*. Others come to John and ask *What should we do?* And John indicates a change of lifestyle based on sharing, by which all people can enjoy fullness of life. But what happens if we aren’t a politician, or a social influencer, or police force, or a multi-billionaire? We could easily point fingers in the direction of what *THEY* should have to change; but what are the issues in our lives that need change? And what sort of change?

Here we hear John the Baptist calling for change and doing so in the most dramatic way. And yet, when John (later) is in prison and hears what Jesus is doing, he sends out his envoys to ask Jesus – “*are you the one who is to come, or should we expect another person?*” There is a disappointment in John, because the two styles are so different. Jesus is not preaching the axe at the root of the tree ready to cut it down, but then later Jesus will lose his cool with the money changers in the temple. Jesus too, preaches change, though does this in a different style.

What often happens is that we prefer John’s style when referring to others, and Jesus’ style when referring to ourselves. But what is central to the whole matter is that changes are needed for the world to come closer to the Kingdom, and we must realise what changes we need to make as part of that calling. Particularly when we are not the influential people of the world, rather the simple people we each are.

All this reminds us that every one of us, not only those of us here, but people everywhere, need a change of heart and of lifestyle – the Greek word used is *metanoia* -turning around, a change of direction. The alternative is truly dramatic, we have heard of it time and time again – what happens in those countries where covid vaccines has not reached the people? What happens when the economic and political powers destroy the rain forests? What happens when the environment is devastated? What happens when countries are bombed and millions are displaced, and refugees begin to seek safety? What happens when workers are abused in such a way that life becomes meaningless? What happens when we buy cheap, ridiculously cheap clothes made in faraway places at the cost of human lives? What happens when we care only for our own benefit and care nothing about others? What happens when.....?

God's promise for fullness of life for all will not descend magically from the heavens, it is built day by day, by each of us, for all of us. That is what John is talking about in today's reading, which is what Jesus' life, teachings, ministry and death and resurrection is all about. That is what Advent calls us to prepare for. THAT is the real meaning of Christmas. Without change, we will just be multiplying all that is wrong. Advent invites us to a time of HOPE, of SHARING, of LOVE, of CHANGE. I honestly believe this can happen, and it can begin with us. Amen,