

The 2nd Sunday of Advent: John the Baptist: a herald or an eccentric?
1st reading: Isaiah 40:1-5+9-11 Be consoled! God is coming with power.
2nd Reading: 2nd Peter 3:8-14 See God's delay as the chance to repent.
Gospel: Mark 1:1-8 John the Baptist appears as God's messenger or herald.

At last! The real Advent 'feel' this weekend! The first reading (from a part of the Book of Isaiah written about 540 BC, near the end of the Exile) is a lovely piece of poetry – full of optimism about God's power. It is the best of Old Testament writing, and gives a sense that our hope is not in vain. If you have a missal or Bible at home, it is certainly worth reading. Mind, it is not a case of our always receiving, and never giving: Isaiah says that 'hills' should be 'flattened' and 'valleys filled in', to make the "straight highway" for God.

This is not about civil engineering: spiritual writers down the years have applied it to us symbolically. To prepare God's way, we should 'flatten the hills' in the sense of getting rid of the bad things we do. Conversely, to 'fill-in the valleys' (spiritually) means seeing good things we do not do, and starting to do them. (This is how Advent can be a sort of 'mini-Lent', as I said last week.) Much TV that we watch is annoying (at least, to me!), with silly ads featuring soppy animated characters doing 'Christmassy' things in the snow. On the other hand, some TV items feature good people helping the lonely, the elderly and the isolated in practical ways, and comforting people who would otherwise be sad. That is "filling in the valleys" in the spiritual sense. I suspect that some, given the cost of living crisis, will not be able to meet as families later this month. Perhaps one way we could 'fill-in' our own spiritual 'valleys' would be to seek out and help someone who will feel lonely this Christmas.

In the 2nd reading, Peter writes: "*With the Lord, a 'day' can mean 1,000 years, and 1,000 years is like a day. He is not being 'slow' to carry out his promises; he is being patient..*" It is another reminder that God is NOT like us: he is totally outside the realm of our time. (In contrast, for bored young people a day may feel like 1,000 years; for 'oldies', a year seems to pass as quickly as a day!) Peter argues: if we are given time to choose a better style of life, this is the result of God being patient, not dilatory. To people of faith, this is a great boon; to those without faith, or who are impatient, or who suffer a lot, it can make religion seem cut off from normal life, and irrelevant. There is nothing new in this: in the Church, there has always been tension between active people and contemplatives. The first group often want everything done immediately, to their plan; the second group opt for a gradual approach. Both have good points.

What about John the Baptist? This Sunday's gospel is the opening 8 verses of St Mark. He does not give any material about Jesus' origin (unlike the famous stories in Matthew & Luke, or the classic Prologue in John). He starts immediately with the fact of John's appearing, his popular appeal, his baptism of forgiveness (the origin of our sacrament of Baptism), and – not least - John's

eccentric lifestyle. St Mark gives little of the Baptist's moral teaching; all he says is that John foretold the coming of "*one more powerful, who would baptize with the Holy Spirit*". While popular with the masses, John was loathed by the religious establishment. In a later, serious argument between Jesus and the chief priests after he had cleansed the Temple (Mark 11:27-30), they asked what authority he had to do this; in reply, he asked them what they thought of John. The people saw him as a prophet; the leaders thought him either a fraud or a madman – at least, a strange eccentric. They did not dare to answer Jesus.

The Church has always seen John the Baptist as a major character – a sort of boundary between the Old and New Testaments. (He is the only saint – apart from Jesus and Mary – to have both his birth and death marked by a feast in the calendar). But, to be honest, I do not think John affects our lives the way the Church liturgy implies that he should. Admittedly, his idea of Baptism was developed into our basic Christian sacrament, and he died very bravely for the truth, but otherwise, he makes little impact on us. Perhaps one useful idea from this weekend's gospel could be this: John appeared "in the wilderness", and that is where people went to find him, and hear his message.

In the frantic rush many families suffer before Christmas, could we "go into the wilderness" for a short while? I do not mean camping out on our chilly hills here round Bellingham! I do mean this: to take a couple of minutes each day, switch off the TV (so avoiding those awful ads), and spend a little time in silence, thought and prayer. There is a lot to think and pray about. Perhaps the only good thing about the ghastly wars in Eastern Europe & the Holy Land, and the worry they are causing, is that they help us appreciate the tension in the air at the time of Jesus' birth. Could we make some time for prayer on our own? Our "wilderness" could be a silent room anywhere in the house – or a walk outside - where we can be alone with God. Then, in the words of the 1st verse of this weekend's psalm, "*I will hear what the Lord God has to say, a voice that speaks of peace, peace for his people.*" At this challenging time in human history, we need some spiritual peace, so please give this a try. *Fr Jim Dunne.*