

The Word Made Flesh ...

... in our own day, in our own lives

A sermon given on the Second Sunday of Advent, 10th December 2023 – by Revd Canon Peter Wadsworth, in Beverley Minster

2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8

You might not think immediately to bracket St. John the Baptist and our new king together, but it was of the king that I was reflecting during my preparation for this morning, and in particular that speech he gave at the COP 28 conference a couple of weeks ago. Because what brings the two utterly different figures together is the theme, really, and the sense in both what he said, the king said, and in the message of John the Baptist, which was a sense of urgency - a time for change and radical change. The king said, "We are way off course in our attempts to meet the challenges of the environmental disaster that is coming." John the Baptist is saying, "The Messiah is coming, you need to change!" And that's really what the word 'repent' means. It's come in English to sort of mean saying sorry for your sins. But actually the original word in Greek means to change direction; to stop the direction you're heading in, turn and go off in a new direction. And that's what John the Baptist is telling people they must do.

And it's interesting that this morning we get Mark's version of the story of John the Baptist, because Mark is the most urgent of all the four Gospels - if you read it through, it's kind of really quite staccato, and never more so than in the way it opens: there are no birth stories; there's no Bethlehem; there's no Nazareth; and there's no great theological reflection like the prologue of John. It's straight in: 'The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.' And we get this brief account of the ministry of John the Baptist. And if indeed you were to read on, the very next verse says, "And then in those days, Jesus came." So there's this sense of urgency.

Now, unfortunately, that sense of urgency has got somewhat watered down over the centuries and particularly in the last half century. So now, this period of Advent is seen very much as a time of preparing to remember something in the past. But that was not always true: I can remember the days when most Christmas things took place after Christmas Day - you probably can as well - in my very first parish, we had our main carol service the Sunday after Christmas and Advent was kept much more solemn. If I tell you that the four themes of preachers up to 100 years ago for Advent were Death, Judgement, Heaven and Hell - not, I think, a popular option these days. And if we had had the other reading set this morning from one Peter, that's all about being ready and prepared for the

Second Coming, the coming in glory of Jesus Christ -and again, that belief has faded and the imagery that goes with it.

I was listening to the beginning of the Sunday worship on Radio Four and it was from a church in South Wales where in recent years they have discovered and started to uncover an amazing series of mediaeval wall paintings, of which the great figure of Death and Judgement is all there on the wall facing you every time you came to church. It is no longer the case and I think probably that kind of picture language doesn't really work for us anymore.

So Advent was a season actually of looking forward, looking forward to the second coming of Christ in glory.

But now, to make things a little more complicated for you, I would suggest to you that there's actually a third and a fourth coming (actually the second and third, because they come before the last one. First of all, that Christ comes to each one of us in our own personal lives, constantly - comes and challenges - we have that famous verse in revelation, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. He who answers and opens, I will come in and sup with him." Or we have at the end of the Gospel where Jesus turns to Peter and says, "Peter, do you love me? Do you love me more than these?" Peter makes that increasingly heartfelt cry, "Lord, you know I love you."

So Christ does come. He comes to each of us and he knocks at the door. And we don't know when that knocking is going to be at its loudest. It may be that we've sort of jogged along for quite a long time in our faith, then suddenly for some reason, whatever it may be, God, as it were, Jesus as it were, knocks at the door and says, "Will you let me in?" Or perhaps it would be better to say, "Will you let me further in?" Imagine that we are in a large house - I can still remember the days when if you turned up at houses, you got shown into the front room - it was a sign, of course, of honour, but also it kept you away from where the real living went on. And if you eventually got invited to come through and sit at the kitchen table, that was an achievement. And perhaps we are all a bit like we invite God into so much of our lives, but then there are other bits that we sort of keep private, or we think we can keep private from him. And so we never know when Jesus will come and say, "Let me in further. Let me work on a deeper level in your life."

Then what about the fourth coming? Well, the fourth one is that Jesus comes in other people, comes to us, as that famous parable of the sheep and the goats puts it when he says, "When I was hungry, you fed me, when I was thirsty, you gave me to drink. When I was in prison, you visited me. When I was naked, you clothed me." And then there are the ones who didn't do that. And Jesus says, "Inasmuch as you did or did not do this, for the

least of these, my little ones, you did it for me." So Jesus actually constantly comes to us in those, particularly those, who are in any kind of need. Goodness knows, we look at our world as it is, as we approach this Christmas and see so much need, so much that needs to be done.

So, okay, maybe the imagery of the final judgement has worn rather thin. And who knows? Who knows when or in what form, everything will come to a conclusion. We believe it will. We believe that creation has a purpose and that one day it will come to a conclusion. But one of the things that the first Church had to sort of learn in its early decades was they really did think it was all going to happen very, very quickly indeed. And one of the first great adjustments in the life of the church was realising, okay, this is going to go on - the life of it is going to go on for a lot longer than we first thought. And who knows? And in a way, it doesn't matter. Indeed, Jesus says to his disciples just before his ascension, "Look, don't get yourself fussed about when and how and all of that - leave that to God."

I would suggest to you that for all of us, as we look back in thanksgiving and celebrate the joy of the coming Christmas, we also need to take seriously that third and fourth coming: the third coming of the personal approach of Christ in our lives, seeking to help us go deeper, asking perhaps more of us - a new step of faith; and the Christ who comes to us in those who are in need and asked to be clothed or fed or visited or just to be noticed and taken seriously -and we see those adverts for 'Crisis' at Christmas - so at Christmas time (we do it all the time, hopefully) but at Christmas time we are particularly reminded of the need to meet Christ in that fourth way.

And so therefore, when we celebrate Christmas, we celebrate it at a much deeper level and we see it as not just some remote event that took place in biblical times, but as the reality of the Word made flesh now, in our own day, in our own lives, in other people

Discussion Points / Points to Ponder:

1. **Urgency in Change:** How can urgency, as conveyed by John the Baptist and echoed in contemporary issues, motivate us towards meaningful change in today's world?
2. **Evolution of Advent:** Reflect on the shift in the perception of Advent from anticipating Christ's second coming to preparing for Christmas. How does this evolution impact our spiritual focus?
3. **Personal Encounters with Christ:** Discuss personal encounters with Christ, considering moments of spiritual awakening or challenges that prompt deeper faith. How do these encounters influence personal growth?
4. **Serving Christ in Others:** Explore practical ways to recognize and serve Christ in those in need around us. How does this perspective alter our approach to charitable actions, especially during festive seasons like Christmas?
5. **Reimagining Christmas:** How might a shift in understanding Christmas, from a historical event to a present reality of encountering the Word made flesh, impact our celebration and spiritual engagement during the holiday season?
6. **The Concept of Time:** Contemplate the concept of time in spiritual beliefs, considering the uncertainty of Christ's second coming. How does this uncertainty influence our attitudes and actions in faith?
7. **Balancing Tradition and Contemporary Interpretation:** Discuss the challenges and benefits of balancing traditional teachings with modern interpretations in understanding and celebrating religious events like Christmas.

Reading Text

2 Peter 3:8-15a

⁸ But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. ⁹ The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. ¹⁰ But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed. ¹¹ Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, ¹² waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? ¹³ But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. ¹⁴ Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; ¹⁵ and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given to him.

Mark 1:1-8

¹ The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. ² As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,

who will prepare your way; ³ the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

"Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight" ' ; ⁴ John the baptiser appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸ I have baptised you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'