

2nd SUNDAY OF ADVENT YEAR B HOMILY 2020

PREPARE THE WAY WITH JOHN THE BAPTIST AND FIRST EUCHARIST

Mk 1.1-8 2Is 40.1-11 1Cor 11.17-26 (First recorded account of Eucharist)

Who remembers *Godspell* from 1970 (the year the Beatles broke up!), first the musical, then the film? (Many of you are too young to have been around back then in my the years of my prime!). Hey Siri, play *Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord*. No, just *Prepare Ye!!*

All in darkness, a horn blows, a light appears focussed on a figure entering from behind the audience, and proceeds to the front, singing the song. It was a striking and memorable surprise entrance, to capture the attention and captivate the crowd, perhaps much as the original John the Baptist left-field wild and woolly preacher, a charismatic figure who made some sense, drew riff-raff of all sorts, to down by the riverside, as he called for a change of heart and life. Forgiveness was his offer, and blame not his game, but the challenge to review one's life and make a change for the better. And the religious leaders didn't like it, because he didn't fit into the Temple scene, like his old man Zac (Zachariah), who did! Why wasn't he following in the footsteps and conforming to normal expectations?

And then we have Jesus disappearing into the desert before he begins his public ministry. It is even suggested that he even spent some time with John the Baptist, roughing it out there, with John "a fierce character, opting out of towns and villages and heading for the desert to preach a harsh repentance, fasting and penance. It was an austere lifestyle." Thus suggests Richard Leonard SJ, who continues: "Jesus returns to the desert on a needs-only basis. Primarily itinerant, Jesus' mission was to be in villages and towns, proclaiming a repentance of mercy, love and compassion." I concur with Richard that we are happier and pleased to follow Jesus, who went out to meet the people where they were, in their own environment, accepting them as they were for who they were, and then offering a positive message of forgiveness, hope and love. He tones down John the Baptist's loud and unrelenting call to radical change, looking more for a gentler change of heart and openness of mind to the world around us and those who are part of it. It's a universal and inclusive message to be applied in our lives.

We can all relate to the desert scenario here in Australia, the clarity and beauty of the stars and planets in the night sky, the aridity, the barrenness, the stark red beauty, and yet the remarkable, almost miraculous transformation into a fragile, floral paradise of new life and beauty when the rains come on rare occasions. Most of the time, we wouldn't want to live out there. Our indigenous peoples of course, over millenia, have worked out a way of living in the land, and adapting to its harsh environment, but it's really not the scene for those of us who live in the comforts of modern society. That's not to say that we don't need time out for reflection and recreation, as perhaps we've realized moreso, as a fringe benefit of the pandemic lockdown restrictions, however difficult we might have found them! Let's be thankful for the results, however, with no new cases or deaths from coronavirus for well over a month now. (And just look at the ongoing disasters of it spreading like wildfire, rampantly and randomly overseas!)

As we prepare the way of the Lord this Advent, John the Baptist's message is still as relevant as ever. For example, there is much talk about the need for ICACs – Independent Commissions against Corruption, Royal Commissions, to expose and resolve the ongoing wrongs and abuses in our own society, not to forget the need for real factual truth and not so-called *fake truth*, which amounts to lies and self-deceit, thinking that something is true because that's what we want to believe!

John surveyed his scene and saw the evil and corruption around him, critical of the temple cult which had become an end in itself, with external observance of prescribed rituals of external prayers and sacrifices, rather than a means to an end, in acknowledging the one God, and so living good and virtuous lives as a natural progression from faith and worship. For John, things had to change. As Spanish theologian Jose Pagola puts it: "This man was putting God at the centre and on the horizon of any search for salvation. The temple, sacrifices, interpretations of the law, even belonging to the chosen people: all that was relative. Only one thing was decisive and urgent: to be converted to God and embrace God's forgiveness."

And John the Baptist wasn't a narcissist, focussing the attention on himself, but pointing to the One to come: "*Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.*" But we know that the long and winding road of life, for all of us, has its unpredictable twists and turns. Human nature, being what it is and so who we ourselves are, never quite gets there, never to the point of perfection, far from it, but we keep trying. The same message challenges us in this time of expectation and preparation, not passively waiting, but actively involved in trying to live better lives, and so to improve the lives of those around us, from family to friends to community, to broader world. Where things have gone wrong in relationships, there is hope for mutually mature acceptance of a need to accept the reality, to forgive and to move on, rather than maintaining bitterness, hostility and anger.

As a further simple example, we have our Christmas tree, set up not just for tinsel and glitter, but as a reminder to see it as a '***Giving Tree***', where we make a contribution to help those in need, often hidden in our local community, supported in particular by our parish St Vincent de Paul Society members. (***This year, we are requesting donations by vouchers, rather than hard imperishable goods, due to the pandemic.***)

And at last, just when we thought it wouldn't be possible this year, we are happy to be celebrating First Eucharist with our young students at Masses over this and next weekend. So, we've changed the second reading to include a Eucharistic theme, with Paul's first account of the Last Supper, as early Christians gathered to break the bread and drink from the cup, as Jesus had instructed, following the washing of the feet, as a call to respond to his Gospel of service.

We might note that Paul was upset to hear that some of the Corinthians were excluding poorer members of their society from coming to celebrate together, and firmly reminds them to work together and be inclusive of all.

The word Eucharist is about thanksgiving, for life, love and faith, and the word Communion reminds us of our connectedness to each other as families and our faith and parish and school communities. We welcome and congratulate those receiving their First Eucharist, and thank their families and teachers for their input and support.

Hopefully, too, for members of our parish community, having been necessarily deprived of receiving Eucharist over the last 8 months or so, we can all be more appreciative of Jesus, as the Bread of Life, strengthening us spiritually on our journey of life. It's also about coming together as a faith community as friends who engage with and support each other through our trials, tribulations, joys and sorrows.

I'll conclude with a parable for First Eucharist, which is a double ended tale with a twist, but ultimately about inclusion, that all are welcome, titled: ***Room on Our Rock*** (by Kate & Jol Temple).

And so we continue to prepare the way of the Lord, as Christmas races in on us, knowing all are welcome here (although restricted to 150 max at present!).

john hannon

6th December 2020