

Homily at Mass 2nd Sunday of Advent Year C – 9 December 2018

Hands up anyone who can tell us anything about the several Roman and Jewish leaders St Luke mentions at the beginning of the Gospel today. Of the 4 Gospel writers, St Luke is careful to situate his account of our Lord's birth, public ministry, death and resurrection in the context of real history. The birth of Jesus at Bethlehem really happened. The preaching of John the Baptist and Jesus really took place round the river Jordan, Galilee in the northern region of modern Israel and Jerusalem, the old city which remains the capital of Israel today. Archaeologists have recently positively identified a ring or seal bearing the name of Pontius Pilate discovered in the ruins of an old royal palace near Bethlehem. Pontius Pilate ruled as Roman governor of the territory we speak of as the Holy Land from AD 26-36. The 15th year of the Roman Emperor Tiberius Caesar falls between 27-29 AD. When historians look at the years of all the others mentioned in today's Gospel – King Herod and his half brother Phillip, and the high priests Annas and Caiaphas – the events St Luke describes today occurred roughly in the Christian era 29-30 AD.

St Luke however brings us from the comfort of palaces and the power of politics out into the desert, the wilderness, where the prophet Isaiah foresaw the figure of John. It's easy to picture in our minds the likes of King Herod – dressed perhaps like the Magi who brought Jesus rich gifts of gold, incense and myrrh. Or Pilate, dressed perhaps in Roman armour like we often see depictions of St George, or Australian actor Russell Crowe in the film 'Gladiator'. Other Gospel writers describe John the Baptist: dressed in a camel skin, his diet locusts and wild honey. I imagine him with a gaunt physique, wild hair, perhaps a sun scorched face, windblown – and we know that his preaching was powerful and direct; his words cut to the heart; he demanded a response, a commitment, a change in the way you live and believe now, today. Repent! Turn your life around: Prepare a way for the Lord!

Out in the desert, "the word of God came to John". Not only is the desert a contrast to the comfort of palaces, but it is also a contrast in environment. Caesar and Pilate and Herod and the rest were politicians – busy with affairs of State, government and everything we suspect about the activities of those who govern us. High priests like Annas and Caiaphas probably had a finger or two in the political pie as well, as we know from the story of our Lord's trial and crucifixion. John the Baptist is another thing altogether. A cousin of Jesus, Jesus humbly receives John's baptism, and honours him as the last greatest of the prophets; "of all men born of women there is none greater than John" Jesus says.

Out in the desert the Word of God came to John. The desert – hot, dry, arid, lonely: a place where a man like John (and Jesus too) is left to encounter God. In the desert John became aware of his mission, and from the desert he makes his way to the banks of the Jordan, feeling urgent. There is no time to waste. You and I have not begun to celebrate Christmas yet. Advent helps us to wait, to build up our hope and expectation, to clear a path for the Saviour who comes: to make the Sacrament of Reconciliation a priority; to say 'yes' to John's cry, "Prepare!" "Repent!"

When we look at our Christmas crib we see Jesus, Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the kings, the angel. Europeans like to add other figures as well – all sorts of characters from village life – a milkmaid, a baker, perhaps even 2 or 3 squabbling neighbours. But I often think that we should also include John the Baptist. It is his voice we hear at Mass today, his preaching, his call to repentance, his compelling invitation, "prepare a way for the Lord". His finger which points us to Jesus, Mary's son born at Bethlehem. Prepare for his coming!