



Sunday Reflection Ordinary Time



in the Charges of St Margarets, Renfrew
& St Johns, Johnstone

For Sunday 10 December 2023

Advent 2

Today we ask what the Gospel's new beginning means for us as we hear the good news afresh at the start of our new church year.

'The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.' (Mark 1.1)

An illustration to set the scene

When John F. Kennedy was shot, the people of the US – and beyond – were stunned. They could hardly take in, let alone make sense, of what had happened. So many hopes and dreams cut short.

Very quickly a way was found to interpret the meaning of what had happened. Parallels were drawn between Kennedy and that symbol of American pride in the values of freedom, Abraham Lincoln. Cardinal Cushing told Kennedy's parents that they had given history a 'youthful Lincoln'. While dignitaries made their way to the White House to pay their respects, on TV an actor read Walt Whitman's poem on the death of Lincoln, 'O captain! My captain!' Kennedy's

body was taken to the Capitol on the same catafalque that had carried Lincoln's.

And television presented people with an indelible image that lodged in the collective memory. As described by Barry Schwartz, the American sociologist, at the moment of Kennedy's burial, 'Television cameras scanning downhill, past the graveside and across the Potomac river, revealed the direct line across the Memorial Bridge to the Lincoln memorial'.¹

What the association with Lincoln provided was a framework of reference, a way of linking the unimaginable with something already familiar, a legitimation of what people felt and above all, the affirmation, at a moment of national peril, of shared identity and values. The parallel emphasised continuity at a moment of fracture and in presenting Kennedy as another martyr suggested that the response must be to double down on the stability of America, not to foresee its disintegration.

Today's Gospel teaching

In today's Gospel Mark announces something totally new – the good news that God had come in Jesus Christ. He proclaimed it, probably about 70 CE to people living in a tense and uncertain world. Following the Jewish revolt against Rome, Jerusalem was under siege. Emperors had been assassinated. In Galilee there were ethnic tensions.

To convey the significance of the new beginning that Jesus brings into the world, Mark reaches into history – and not any history. He references the prophets, Isaiah (see today's Old Testament reading) and Malachi who foretold that the coming of the Lord would be preceded by a messenger who would announce God's promise to make a straight path for the one to come and cry out to the people to get ready. Behind these references people would recognise God's great promise to come to his people and comfort them.

¹ Barry Schwartz, 'Memory as Cultural System: Abraham Lincoln in World War II', *American Sociological Review*, 61.5 (1996), 908–27.

Mark provides a framework for interpreting the meaning of John the Baptist's ministry. Mark remakes the story he is telling. People might have thought they knew what the Scriptures were about, but now they are living them, and under the appearance of continuity, they are being remade for a new age. Now they are seen to point to Jesus. John is just the prelude: it is God's son who will reveal God's glory. Mark performs a neat narrative move -interpreting John the Baptist's significance in terms that would make sense, while at the same time demonstrating that despite John's enormous reputation and influence, he was not the one whom Israel had been waiting for, he was merely the messenger.

And John himself seems to have been engaged in the same narrative- making. His appearance dramatically recalls the prophet Elijah, the one after whom prophesy ceased. Now, his performance suggests, the scene is set for a new prophet. John the Baptist's demonstration of himself as Elijah seems to have made his message the more compelling. We hear that people flocked to him. And like all successful communicators, his words moved his hearers to action. In droves they confessed their sins and sought baptism from him in the river Jordan. It was a religious revival. Out of the tumult of the world of Roman occupied Galilee and the turbulence of their own lives they found in John the Baptist a call to change, a hope of renewal, a summons to a new beginning.

Applying the teaching to our own lives

And now in 2023 the story is told again for and by us. It is our story now. These are not dusty old texts; they are living words whose promises and admonitions are addressed to us. And they are rarely comfortable. What do we make of the words of today's Old Testament reading as we watch the news?

*Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,*

*that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins. (Isaiah 40.1-2)*

Those words are likely to be heard very differently in different parts of the Middle East or by those with differing views of the rights and wrongs of the war in Gaza. Rather than consign them to the 'belonging to a different place and time' box perhaps we need to hear afresh in them the voice of a God of infinite mercy, weeping over the pain of all God's displaced children, the God of peace and tenderness:

*He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep. (Isaiah 40.11)*

We can revisit the metaphor of God using our own images - the aid worker taking risks amongst the rubble, the grieving parent of the hostage, the doctor cradling the child for whom she now has no medicine, only compassion.

The agony of the exile, the longing for return these are not emotions and aspirations left behind in the past.

God promises a new beginning, good news. What new beginnings are *we* hoping for? During the pandemic some spoke about 'the new normal'. Do we long for things as they used to be, or can we sense a new reality breaking in? Can we hear that God's tenderness extends to us, that he longs for us to be reconciled and that he will wait for us in God's good time. Does this move us to turn away from the habits and preoccupations that lead nowhere towards the riskier possibility that hope is not an illusion, that another way is open to us, that God is making a way in the desert for the redemption of all and that there is a person who will bring God close and offer us a relationship that will reset our lives and minds and hearts. Spoiler alert: that person is Jesus Christ who has come and comes to us. How do we take him as our template and model for understanding the shocks our world and our lives experience? How do we tell the stories of our lives afresh in the light of our relationship with him? How will we hear the stories of Jesus as evidence of the saving grace of God for us? And how will that change how we see the

news, the state of our country, our work, our families and relationships and our sense of ourselves? Make way this Advent for God the Holy Spirit to smooth the path to your heart and rewrite your story. For this is *the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

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