

Sunday 14th December Advent 3 2008: Preparation Robert Innes

The City of Brussels is preparing for Christmas. The supermarkets have hired in extra freezers to store Christmas food, the foie grass is on display, and the first turkeys have appeared. The Galleries Louise has unfurled its red carpet, and the beautiful blue street lights along the Toisson d'Or shine brightly. This year, though, the shopping bonanza is not what it has been. Economic times are harder. We are in recession. People are losing their jobs. And in Britain, one of the biggest chain stores, Woolworth's launched its closing down sale this week.

For many of us, preparing for Christmas, is an extra source of work and of stress. Coping with the dark mornings, driving the car on icy roads, or waiting for trains delayed by frozen points, doesn't encourage us to feel full of Christmas cheer. Yet for those of us who are Christians, Advent is a good time. It is a season of hope. We gather to celebrate the news relayed to us by St. John, that the true light, which enlightens everyone, is coming into the world. In a year when the Western commercial Christmas seems even more contradictory than usual, the church has a message of hope and expectancy. Prepare the way of the Lord. Make yourselves ready for the coming of the Messiah. We have a spiritual message which is relevant to all: old and young, to rich and poor, to those who are self-confident and to those who worry what the future will bring.

The Gospel of St. John begins in a most wonderful way. Most stories start at the beginning and continue to the end. John does this. But this gospel also works in another dimension. It starts from above and works out implications in the world below. The first few verses of John depict a realm of light and life – the realm of God. And they suggest that this divine realm is spilling over into the affairs of men.

One of the most basic, existential, questions for us human beings is to know whether we are all alone in the universe. Does our life just begin and end with ourselves, or is there perhaps, something or someone out there who is beyond us and before us and bigger than us? St. John's gospel answers this question with a majestic but mysterious 'yes'. God was there in the beginning. We are not alone. God has been there since the start. So if our personal world sometimes feels very fragile and scary and transient – we can draw comfort from this: that God is before us, and above us and around us.

What is more, we are the objects of God's attention. He has decided to reveal himself to us. Into a world which often feels dark, God is sending a light. He has lit a candle. The true light who enlightens everyone, is coming into the world. Christmas is coming.

St. John's gospel was written to a group of believers around the end of the 1st century who saw in Jesus the uncreated light. Getting to know him was like the dawn breaking all over creation and all over their community. It was like getting to know God. And so it is today.

The beginning of St. John's gospel describes in poetic language this mysterious interaction between the world of God and the world of human beings. It is within this context that John the Baptist appears. He is a man, we are told, who is sent by God. And he has a particular job, which is to testify to the light, to bear witness to it. He

will in fact be the first in a number of witnesses who appear in the early chapters of this gospel to testify concerning Jesus. Let me mention three things that strike me about John.

First his work is totally concerned with preparation. John appears in chapter 1 and then again in chapter 3, but after that he disappears. His job is to provide a kind of backdrop to Jesus. John gathers a group of disciples some of who form the nucleus of the disciples who follow Jesus. He preaches a tough message of repentance which provides a sort of foil to the good news of grace preached by Jesus. He tells people to prepare.

More generally, you could say that the whole of the Old Testament is a kind of preparation for Jesus. Jesus lived on earth for just 30 years, his public ministry was just three years, but for thousands of years people had been preparing for him. God takes great pains over preparation, and much of human life is taken up with preparing. And in a real sense, of each of our lives on this earth is taken up with preparing to meet our God. So at this time of Advent, mid-December, when preparations of various kinds dominate our lives, let us prepare well. The point of Advent isn't merely to have everything ready so we can slump into an armchair on Christmas afternoon in front of the fire. It is to care for people through our preparations, to bring joy to people, to glorify God through the people we are and the way we react when we are under pressure, when we are having to work hard, when the stress is on.

Secondly, John gains his identity through his relation to Jesus. I am very struck by the dialogue between John and the Jews from Jerusalem who are sent to interview him. Whenever the Jews ask him who he is John replies "I am not". "I am not Elijah; I am not the Prophet; I am not the Christ." Well you might say, "here is a man with a big image problem." He's never going to get very far in the world if he can't sell himself a bit better than that.

But actually, John is completely sure of who he is. "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord." John's role is playing second fiddle to Jesus. And he actually plays that role so well that 2000 years later people all over the world know when they hear the words "prepare the way of the Lord" the man who spoke them was John the Baptist.

John is concerned not to detract from the one he follows. It is a fact of human experience that people easily follow powerful preachers and persuasive personalities. There are hundreds of sects and cults in the world today that owe their existence to a strong founding personality. And John is determined not to be the kind of celebrity personality who will actually distract people from following Jesus.

In relation to Jesus, John could be completely confident in who he was and what he was supposed to be doing. And that can be true for each of us too. Many people today suffer from low self-esteem and problems with self-image. Yet it is my experience that even the humblest people can be completely secure in who they are if they have a firm relationship with Jesus and with God.

Then, thirdly, John came as a witness. It is very interesting that in the fourth gospel, John is not described as a baptizer, nor as a prophet, nor as a messenger. He is

described as a witness. And that is significant. A prophet is someone who claims to know God's will and who speaks it. A witness, on the other hand, is someone who has seen a significant event and who speaks of what he sees. The fourth gospel is very keen on the idea of the witness – this gospel uses it over 30 times, and John is the first witness.

Now very few people are prophets. But we are all witnesses. All of us have seen things which we can talk about. And those of us who are Christians have some kind of experience of God, or at least experience of Christian community, that we can speak about.

For a few decades now, Western Europe has been a secular society. That means talking about God is something which has been relegated to private life. Talking about God in public has been politically incorrect. It is OK for professionally religious people like me to talk about God, but normal people don't do that sort of thing. That has been the rule.

But, I really believe that is changing. It is increasingly difficult for Western Europeans to behave as if the religious dimension to life was of no consequence. Because it is obvious that in almost the whole of the rest of the world religion is very important. And even here in Europe we are welcoming people from other faiths, who are much less apologetic about their religious convictions than Christians have learnt to be. The Deputy Prime Minister of the Netherlands recently suggested that we are moving to a 'post-secular society', and I think he is right.

So I would encourage all of us to think of what it might mean to be a witness to Jesus, as John was. In a few sentences could you talk about your own religious experience, your Christian experience, in a way which isn't complicated theology, but which just says in an unembarrassed way what your Christian faith means to you.

Let me draw to a close. In this Advent time we look forward to the coming of the light of Jesus Christ into our world. We celebrate the wonderful truth that the eternal God reaches out to our world to reassure us of his care and concern for us, to remind us that we are not alone. Today we have been looking at the fourth gospel's presentation of John. He is someone who, in the other gospels, appears as a man very unlike us: clothed in camel hair, eating wild honey, living in the desert. But from the fourth gospel we see he has qualities from which we can learn. He is someone who is committed to the task of preparation. He is not afraid to embrace a vocation which is entirely concerned with preparation. In our world, which values satisfaction, fulfilment, instant results, John reminds us that for many of us it is in *preparation* that our faith and our life is worked out. Secondly, John finds a secure identity in a subordinate relationship to Jesus. At a time when everyone wants to be a leader, and where people's self-esteem is often fragile, John offers us a way of being a secure and settled person in relation to God. And thirdly, John is a witness to Jesus, the first witness to him. The word for a witness is the same word as for martyr, and for John martyrdom was the result of his witnessing. That is unlikely to be the case for us. Yet, in whatever circumstances we find ourselves, with our colleagues, friends and family, let us not be excessively timid in bearing witness to the God whom we worship and the Lord whom we follow. Amen.