

Mark's gospel has no nativity story. It starts right here, with the prophet Isaiah and John's voice in the wilderness. Instead of having a privileged position on the action where we're 'in the know' about Jesus from the beginning, in Mark's Gospel, we're invited to stand alongside the crowds gathered at the Jordan river, hearing John the Baptist's call to repentance. We're asked to identify with their sense of need and almost hopeless hope that things could change. For a brief moment at the start of this Gospel, we are at that riverside, lost in our weariness and confusion, and listening to this desert dweller telling us that someone is coming to save us. Can we hear him today, and really prepare our hearts for the one he proclaims?

Mark quotes from Isaiah, where the prophet hears a voice saying, "*Cry out!*" Isaiah asks, "*What shall I cry?*" and receives the answer "*All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field... The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.*"

In other words, people are fragile, short-lived and fickle. You can't rely on human beings to bring about the conditions for justice and peace. That's why we can't expect any form of political leadership to usher in the world we long for. And we, in ourselves, are fragile, short-lived and fickle. By ourselves, our lives don't amount to much in this world's perspective, no matter how important we might feel we are. We let ourselves and others down far more than we like to think. Only trust in God's constancy and faithfulness, and in God's long-term timing, allows us to live lives that are also faithful, rather than grasping at agendas and solutions to our problems that make things worse for ourselves and those who rely on us.

Left to our own devices, people are intrinsically idolatrous. That is, whatever we say we believe, and whatever we say our values are, at another level of our being we all give our allegiance to whatever meets our deepest needs. And many of us don't know what those needs are that really sit behind our behaviours and choices. We think our loyalty is with God, but in fact our behaviour shows that we're serving the god of our need to belong, or to feel powerful, or to be in control, or to be thought well of, or to live comfortable, undisturbed lives.

Repentance is a scary word, but really, it just means coming to awareness of the ways we are betraying our God, and our desire to be faithful, by giving in to the pressure of our invisible inner drivers. It means confronting and confessing when we can see by our actions that something else has been running the show rather than our expressed loyalty to God. It means turning around to serve once again the Lord of love who is far more capable of meeting our needs than we are.

Of course, while that sounds easy, actually it's not simple and it can be quite painful. I don't know if you find this, but when we pray our confession as part of our Eucharistic liturgy, I find it's not always easy to bring to mind things to confess. And that's not because I don't have any! The thing is, our sins are hidden from us – we can't see ourselves as others experience us and even if a glimpse does sneak through we have a whole lot invested in explaining it away as quickly as possible so that we can go back to feeling good about ourselves.

C. S. Lewis depicts this brilliantly in his book *That Hideous Strength* through the character of Mark, a young man who has a deep-seated longing to be an 'insider' and an inability to tolerate feeling left out. The effect of this longing on his life choices becomes, in time, catastrophic, leading him to discard genuine friends for false ones, and to betray his values where they don't align with what the inner circle of his work colleagues demand from him. He jettisons all his instinctive relationships and enjoyments to seem more aligned with the people and activities he perceives as fashionable and important. It is only when faced with the immanence of his own death that he starts to realise how very estranged he's become from any kind of moral true north, or even allegiance to his own interests.

As the realisation of his diminished and ridiculous existence dawns on him with horror, he finds himself wondering why "all this, which was now so clear, had never previously crossed his mind." I am now quoting from the book. "He was unaware that such thoughts had often knocked for entrance, but had always been excluded for the very good reason that if they were once entertained it involved ripping up the whole web of his life, cancelling almost every decision his will had ever made, and really beginning over again as though he were an infant."

In other words, true repentance is difficult to face, and demands a kind of re-building of our habitual responses and behaviours, often excavating decades of conditioned actions and reactions. Which of course is why baptism is such a potent symbol, effecting, as it does, the death of an old life and re-birth into a new one – or, as Lewis frames it, ripping up the web of life and re-weaving its strands from scratch.

Which brings us back to the banks of the Jordan and the preparatory work of John the baptiser, calling people to repentance. The people of the Judean countryside would not be capable of responding to Jesus' teaching and learning new ways of being unless they had first looked at their lives and seen what needed to be transformed in them and in their social patterns.

Of course, this was just preparation. John's baptism of repentance could not, in itself, save those who received it from themselves or from endlessly repeating the same old messes they'd experienced before. John baptised with water. The promised one, more powerful than John, baptises with the Holy Spirit.

And this, ultimately, is what separates us from those Judeans at the riverside if we are willing to commit ourselves to open eyes and open hearts. As those who have been baptised in both water and the Spirit, we can rely on God's enabling strength to renew and transform our lives day by day, as we keep turning from our false allegiances and devoting ourselves to receive the grace and salvation that constantly flows from God's heart.

Perhaps we are living in enough of a wilderness time now that maybe people are beginning to be ready to receive a word of hope and comfort that is also paired with a call to turn around, to repent. I wonder if, in our wider culture, at least some people are realising we have to do things differently – realising that peace does not grow from violent revenge, realising that our earth's resources are not infinite, and our lives are in peril because of our greed, realising that crime emerges from poverty and abuse and therefore needs to be healed rather than punished, perhaps even realising that the mental health crisis in the West is actually a spiritual crisis.

"Lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" The One who we wait for this and every Advent is coming into the world, ready to fill every heart with the renewing Spirit of God and transform our communities with peace. Will we be bold, like John, to proclaim this as the answer to the longings of our generation?