

I recall many years ago when I was Rector in County Laois visiting a retired Roman Catholic Priest in Hospital in Portlaoise one Easter. We had struck up a friendship. He had grown up in the village of Clonaslee in my Parish and ended up as Parish Priest in Birmingham in a Parish near where I had grown up. And I had come from Birmingham and ended up ministering in Clonaslee to where he had come to retire. It was his first Easter since he had been ordained that he had not been leading worship. He said something that Easter Day that has stayed with me ever since. ‘We are an Easter people’.

I thought of that encounter as I read over the lessons being read at our Advent Service this evening and I found myself thinking that we are an Advent People. The two are not contradictory: for it as an Easter People that we, as an Advent People wait in hope.

As an Advent People we are a people in waiting but we do not wait as passive observers. We read in Matthew’s Gospel of John the Baptist warning the Pharisees and Sadducees:

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.” *Matt 3:7-9*

Now it is worth noting that Luke, as he describes this same episode, tells us of John saying these same words to everyone who came out to hear him. Sometimes we can think that uncomfortable passages of scripture apply only to other people and not to me.

‘Bear fruit worthy of repentance.’ There’s a modern catchphrase that says, ‘If you are going to talk the talk then you need to walk the walk’. It reminds us that fine words are not enough. Fine words need to be followed up in life.

As I thought on that my mind turned to words of the Prophet Micah:

“With what shall I come before the Lord,  
and bow myself before God on high?  
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,  
with calves a year old?  
Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,  
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?  
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”  
He has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love  
kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God? *Micah 6:6-8*

God requires faithfulness – not extravagance.

Bear fruit worthy of repentance.

In the course of his ministry Jesus told a number of Parables that point to the coming of the Kingdom. One that has spoken to me over these last few days, as I have been thinking over the service this evening, is the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. You recall the King turns to those on his right and says:

‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ *Matt 25:34-40*

You recall he turns to those on his left and turns them away because of their failure to respond. Their complaint could be summed up as ‘Lord, if we had realised it was you, of course we would have helped you.’

As an Advent People we are waiting in hope. As we await the coming of Christ in glory, let us not lose sight of the Christ we encounter in our midst.

This picks up on what we were thinking about earlier. As an Advent People, as a people in waiting, we do not wait as passive observers. In our last Lesson from St Luke, we hear of Jesus as he teaches in his home town of Nazareth, identifies his ministry, the Kingdom he has come to bring in with words of the Prophet Isaiah, a Kingdom of Good News for the poor, the prisoner, the blind, the oppressed. Later on in his Gospel, Luke tells of John the Baptist languishing in prison. In the isolation of his prison cell, John clearly wonders has he got it wrong, had he made a dreadful mistake in pointing to Jesus. We read:

When the men came to Jesus, they said, "John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, 'Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?'"

At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. So he replied to the messengers, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me." *Luke 7:20-23*

John has been faithful. His work as a herald of the Kingdom has been done.

As an Advent People, as a people who wait in hope, a people who are not merely passive observers, we are called to be faithful as heralds of the Kingdom of God not merely by what we say, but by who we are. To be living and active signs in the places and time in which God has placed us; to be people and communities of reconciliation, in our stand for justice, for healing of body, mind and soul in our broken and hurting world; that we too may hear our Lord greeting us:

‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; .....  
Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.