

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." Now John wore a garment of camel's hair, and a leather girdle around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then he went out to him in the wilderness of Judea and all the region about the Jordan, and they were baptised by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit that befits repentance, and do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. "I baptise you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry; he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

(Mt 3:1-12)

Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan empty of their inhabitants as the people up for a few days and make their way to John to be baptised. It's like a parish during a papal visit: house after house closed up while the neighbours all take off and leave the land deserted for a few days. There they confess their sins out loud as he dunked them in the river, for all the neighbours to hear! John must have been like a magnet and even later, after he was dead, Jesus asks the people, "What did you go out into the desert to see?" and answers himself, "A prophet, and yes, much more than a prophet!" People saw something amazing in John that the Gospels which roused up them into a great expectation that the time had really arrived and God was getting into gear. And they had it right: John's mission is a sign that God is on the march.

The colour of Advent is purple, because in ancient Roman times a city would be decked out in purple when the emperor was coming to visit, purple being the colour of kingship. We wear purple in Advent because God is on the march, to rule over us as king. John is convinced that the Messiah will be a judge with Spirit and unquenchable fire. The image he paints is fearsome, the world alight in bonfires of the guilty. And John is a judge himself: notice how gentle he is towards the common people, but fiery towards the fashionable elite of Pharisees and Sadducees.

If we allow ourselves to be guided by this Gospel, it tells us that Advent is a time of judgment, a time of separating the wheat from the chaff. The child in the crib is the judge. Wrapped in swaddling clothes, he judges the expensive gifts we lavish on Christmas and asks if that is really the meaning. The look of deep peace in the eyes of his Mother judge the truth of the love with which we meet at Christmas. How much less expensive Christmas would be, and how much more satisfying if we took those judgments on ourselves at Christmas. It's true what St John the Baptist says, the Child in the crib judges "with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

QUESTIONS

- 1) John the Baptist wears a garment of camel's hair, and a leather girdle around his waist to resemble the prophet Elijah (cf. 2Kgs 1:8). But what other, more ordinary significance does it have that he dresses so simply and eats locusts and wild honey in the desert?
- 2) Do you remember the papal visit of 1979 (if you were born then) and the crowds coming to hear John Paul II telling people, "Be converted every day,"? What do you think of his message? How does it relate to what John the Baptist is saying?
- 3) The Pharisees and Sadducees are complacent because they have "Abraham for their father," but even the complacent will be judged. What are the dangers of complacency among Catholics in Ireland this Advent?

PROJECT

Go through your list of things you have to do for Christmas: we all have lots of important things to do. It is a busy time. Maybe we could try to prioritise one new thing to be put on that list, something that highlights the values which are present in the story of the birth of Jesus and in the life of St John the Baptist.

