

Sermon for Sunday 10.12.17

Today is the second Sunday of Advent and as we may know, the Advent Season spans the 4 weeks before we celebrate the birth of Christ on Christmas day.

Advent is a season of joy, preparation and hope. Advent is also the beginning of the church calendar.

The church calendar, has a cycle of three years and the first cycle, usually denoted by an A, is when the gospel of Matthew is used as the primary source of readings.

The second cycle, B, uses Mark as the primary source of readings, and in the third cycle, C, Luke is used.

The gospel of John weaves its way throughout the readings every year and is read also on major feast days.

This year, 2018, is year B, hence Mark is our primary source of readings.

Now Marks gospel is generally thought to be the earliest gospel written. Dated somewhere between 60 and 70 common era.

It is also generally accepted that Marks gospel was used in the composition of the gospels of Matthew and Luke.

Although the gospel of Mark is anonymous, an ancient tradition ascribes it to John Mark mentioned in Acts of the Apostles, who composed it at Rome.

Of course like many things in the theological world, this is debatable.

Marks gospel is the shortest gospel.

The author gives us nothing but the barest outlines as he proclaims the story of the construction of "the way".

It features the extraordinary life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Jew "from Nazareth of Galilee" whose unparalleled activity establishes once and for all a new road into life.

Mark does not paint the landscape with flowery descriptions.

His stories are stark and revelatory.

We believe his targeted audience at the time of writing was Rome's messianic Jews – those Jews who had confessed Jesus as their messiah.

As such, these were followers who had little use for flowery themes, for they constantly lived under the threat of the death sentence.

What they did seek for reassurance was the core of the message simply and directly proclaimed.

Mark provided exactly this. He constantly went straight to the point and assured them that their messiah knew suffering first hand and not only genuinely understood their suffering but was there, in their very midst, with them in theirs.

Now although Mark relates the message of Christ in the world using words that are at times terse and spare, he does not – ever – deliver a singular message of difficulty.

Nor does he depict trials that lead only into despair. In the gospel we hear that each image of wilderness, desert or water is coupled with an image of comfort or hope fulfilling the prophesy in the reading from Isaiah today.

Today's gospel passage begins with the first verse in the first chapter of the gospel and we notice that this gospel does not begin with the nativity scene. That is left to the gospels of Luke and Matthew.

Mark instead starts at the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, with John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin and forerunner. We might say that John the Baptist, sums up the whole story of the Bible so far at the beginning of Mark's gospel.

In effect, John the Baptist tells us that something is about to happen and we've very little idea what it is, and we've no idea how radical and how complete a change it will involve.

So John the Baptist points forward and tells us that everything we've always hoped for, everything we've longed for; the change, the freedom, the peace, is about to come.

It may well be a shock coping with all of that so we need to get ourselves ready. 'Make straight the Lord's path,' says John the Baptist, quoting the old prophecies.

So what does this all mean for us as we await the birth of the Christ during Advent 2017.

How does Mark's gospel, written nearly 2000 years ago for a group of people who are long gone, hold relevance today for us.

Firstly I believe that the longing the people had in those ancient times is a part of our human DNA. Whether in conscious thought or not, I believe we all long for a new way into life that will be one of peace and inner freedom.

The birth we await in Advent 2017 is the birth of the one who opens the door to that new way.

In Jesus ministry on earth, he teaches us how to respond to challenges in life and how to love. In death he shows us that he knows suffering and is with us in ours, and in resurrection he shows us that newness is possible in the here and now and in the age to come.

Secondly I believe in our age old faith we find our covenantal root system that keeps us ready to be effectively involved in determining the shape of what lies ahead in future times.

Through the way of Christ, the teachings offer us knowledge in the way of patience, commitment, community, selflessness, responsibility, accountability, strength and dependant prayerfulness.

All this emanates from our faith narrative, a covenantal root system that offers a secure base communally, emotionally and morally.

And perhaps never more needed as it is now, in our very volatile world today.

I would ask you now to join with me and pray the prayer of hope that befits our Advent Season as we look forward to the coming of the Christ and it is on the front page of the pew sheet.

Now in a little while I am going to baptise Thomas Avila and although I am no John the baptiser, today I am Nannie the baptizer and what a privilege it is to baptise Thomas into

the Body of Christ, into the Christian family, that depends upon the Christ who knows the way of the new road into life in this world and in the next. The Lord be with you.