

Crying Out in the Wilderness (Mark 1: 1-8)

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Advent, the coming upon us of newness, is difficult for human beings. We get attached to how things are, adapted to the status quo. The advent of what's strange asks something of us – it requires us to renew our minds or reorient ourselves in the world. Even when what's coming is a 'good' thing, the need to change or make ready for the new is likely to provoke at least some unease, disorientation, even mourning for what's passing away. I think this is part of the experience of getting married, for example, or having a child – these are clearly 'good' things, advents that bring joy, and yet people can find themselves discombobulated and grieving unexpectedly for the life they're leaving behind – that carefree single self they've known till now! How much more so, then, when what's coming towards us is unchosen or feels radically disruptive. No wonder denial, resistance and hostility are common reactions.

We are in the liturgical season of Advent, anticipating the in-breaking of something good – the love of God coming to dwell among us. That's challenging enough – requiring us to break with some pretty entrenched human patterns. At the same time, we're facing the possibility of an even more frightening kind of advent – catastrophe coming upon us in the form of a breakdown in the earth's ecosystems and in our collective capacity to respond. Two advents. Two futures coming towards us. It seems to me that we cannot speak of one these days, without speaking of the other. And the question that's urgent (at least for me) is how are we to live well in this time? How are we to remain faithful, trusting in the promise of God's coming and salvation, and yet also truthful about our situation and the danger we're in? What is the work of love in the face of doom – and how might our participation in this work transform our fate? Tonight I sense there's something for us to learn from the witness of John the Baptist.

In the gospel story, John is the one given the unenviable task of being the harbinger of a radical disruption to the status quo. His message is called 'good news' by the evangelists but it certainly didn't appear that way to everyone. John is compelled to share it anyway. He's been given to see what's destructive in the way of life he sees around him, he's glimpsed what's coming to be in the desire of God and the repentance this coming calls for. That means, that from the perspective of those in power, those invested in the way things are, he's the bearer of an inconvenient truth. So how does *he* go about living his difficult vocation in a world that's stuck?

He begins by crying out. At first glance, this seems an unattractive proposition. He wanders around in weird clothes, apparently the first century equivalent of a guy in a sandwich board shouting 'repent or perish'. And speaking for myself, I don't want to be like that – I don't want people to experience me as harping on, or doom-saying, or being overly pessimistic. But what if the sandwich board is the wrong image for what John is up to? After the 2011 tsunami in Japan, I read of a woman whose job it had been to raise the alarm in her town. According to survivors, this woman sat in a watch-tower shouting on a megaphone as the wave came and came, exhorting her fellow citizens to flee. She did not flee herself or escape to higher ground, but stayed at her post, crying out without ceasing until finally the tower succumbed to the waves and she was swept away.

Crying out, for her as for John the Baptist, was about sounding the warning. It was not about self-righteousness but self-giving. It communicated radical connection to others and the determination that none should be lost. In the face of *our* looming crisis, there are many giving themselves in this way to warn and save. I think of climate scientists, advocates and writers, of activists at the Adani mine site, economists developing new models for common life and teachers communicating their pained love for the world to the next generation. Crying out can take many forms. But notice what's essential is that we not deny the reality of what we're faced with, that we not leave our posts or seek ease of heart and mind in false

complacency or the presumption that necessarily, all will be well. The work of love the face of doom begins with crying out.

But here's what's hard. When our cry implies the need for radical change, it's always liable to attract resistance, hostility, even attack. People don't necessarily want to be warned. The Baptist's outcry was connected intrinsically to the experience of wilderness. It emerged *from* the wilderness, because he who is at the edge is more likely to see what the centre cannot. It took him *into* wilderness – the wilderness of ridicule, dismissal, rejection – because, as far as the centre is concerned, he'd become a voice too threatening to have around.

And there's a kind of paradox here. To keep on crying out in the wilderness seems almost by definition to be pointless. After all, in the wilderness who is *there* to hear? Yet the mystery is that, over time, this cry does generate a hearing. The philosopher Jean-Louis Chrétien writes: 'Speech takes risks because it is always the *unheard-of* that it wants to say, when it really wants to say something ... [T]he voice blazes for itself a trail that was not marked out in advance ... It can be strong only in its weakness'.¹

A voice crying out in the wilderness is an image of futility, impotence. But when it testifies to truth and is persisted in faithfully, then somehow, mysteriously, its sound goes out to all the earth. People from the whole Judean countryside and even from Jerusalem, that ultimate symbol of the centre, came out to John to hear him, to confess their sins and be baptized into a new kind of life. And it's the same in our day – the voices that had been deemed fringe, the dismissable speech of a few camel-hair clad ferals, has caught the attention of the centre. The cry is being heard, taken seriously. We are repenting and being changed.

Will it be enough? Can we 'save the planet'? From all I read, the truth is that we don't know if we're responding in time to avert the worst. Every piece of encouraging news, the faster than expected take up of renewable energy, for

¹ Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Ark of Speech*, trans. Andrew Brown (London: Routledge, 2004), p.13.

example, seems counter-balanced by bleak revelations of accelerating rates of deforestation and political corruption. The advent of disaster remains a real possibility, and is already befalling certain communities and parts of the natural world.

Yet we proclaim that another advent is also upon us – the advent of the Lord, God with us – the advent of one through whom death can be turned to life. I don't believe we can take this as an easy consolation, a glib assurance that whatever we do, God will make it right in the end. And yet this coming *is* the ground of our faith that unfathomable goodness is the source of all things and is, even now, actively seeking the world's good. What *faith* means is daring to entrust ourselves to this goodness, this promise, and to return wholeheartedly to it, which is repentance. And what we know is that the more we receive from this goodness, act from it, surrender to it, then the more what is of God can break through into us and our common life. It's in this way that impotence becomes poverty of spirit – which is a paradoxically powerful place. For this is where grace happens, where we are baptized with the Holy Spirit and where what seemed impossible becomes somehow possible after all.

What is the work of love in the face of doom – and how might we participate in this work to transform our fate? From John the Baptist we learn it's about daring to see what's coming and then crying out in warning and solidarity; it's about embracing wilderness and the impotence of our cry, keeping faith with what we're given to know and share, and so becoming poor in spirit – people in whom grace happens and through whom new life may break. This Advent, then, may our faith be renewed for the healing of the world.