

"John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." (Mark 1:4)

It is interesting to find in the Gospel extract for today, evidence to suggest that Mark was not quite the Biblical scholar that we assume the writers of the New Testament to be! In introducing John the Baptist as the forerunner of Christ, he claims to quote the prophet Isaiah but in fact the first half of the quotation comes from the Book of the Prophet Malachi (3:1): "I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me." And the second half, which does come from Isaiah, has an interesting change in it. Mark says that Isaiah proclaimed: "A voice of one calling in the desert, Prepare the way." Actually the quote is: "A voice of one calling, In the desert prepare the way." (Is.40:3) It's probably not all that important except to the nit-pickers - it is the message which counts.

Both today and next Sunday's Gospel have John the Baptist and his message as the dominant theme. His appearance on the scene is the introduction to the ministry of Jesus, and each of the four Gospels uses the coming of John for that purpose. John comes in from the desert preaching the need for repentance in preparation for the ministry of one whose shoelaces he is not worthy to untie. As a sign of their repentance and desire to be cleansed from all stain of sin, those who heed John's call are baptized, there, in the River Jordan. "I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." Matthew says: "Carry his sandals"; Mark and Luke agree on "untie them". It means the same - unworthiness. John the Baptist was the link between the prophets of the Old Covenant, or Agreement with God and His people, and Jesus, bringing in the New Covenant. To begin His ministry, Jesus went south from Nazareth to where John the Baptist was preaching and baptizing at the River Jordan, and sought baptism from him. According to Matthew's record, John was loath to baptize Jesus, recognizing that here was a person who was sinless and did not need the baptism of repentance. "But John tried to deter Him, saying: I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus persuaded him, and Matthew goes on to tell that: "At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, This is my Son, whom I love: with him I am well pleased." (Matt.3:13-17)

From His baptism, Jesus went out into the wilderness to work out His plan of campaign for His ministry, and while there was tempted by Satan to use superficial and spectacular means to attract followers.

In a very significant sense, John the Baptist played an important part in the beginning of the Gospel - the proclamation of the Good News that God so loved the world that the Second Person of the Holy Trinity became Man in order to save mankind from its deserved results of disobedience to its Creator. Unless we are aware that we are fallen creatures, then we have no awareness of a need of a Saviour. As St. Paul wrote: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Rom.3:23)

And it is precisely because very many people do not see themselves as sinners, or excuse themselves of their little idiosyncrasies and mistakes, that they see no need of Christ as Saviour, and so no need to worship Him in acknowledgement of His saving acts, and so no need to seek the strengthening of the Holy Spirit to enable them to become more like the child of God that they are meant to be. Is it any wonder that to so many people Christmas is little more than the celebration of the birth of a wise and even godly teacher of a high moral standard of behaviour? But the New Testament insists, in the words of John the Baptist, St. Paul Jesus Himself, -and lots of others, that *repentance is the essential precondition for faith*. "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." So wrote St. John in his first Epistle (1 Jn.1:8)

This first requirement is picked up in both the Baptism and the Confirmation services: "Do you turn to Christ? Do you repent of your sins?" The preaching of John the Baptist, calling for recognition of our sinfulness and repentance, that is, the desire to turn away from our weaknesses, cannot be good news in itself. We could be left with a deep feeling of guilt, and that would be destructive. But John's preaching is the beginning of the good news, the Gospel, which Jesus brings, the assurance that "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." (Rom.5:8) So for the Christian, the Festival of Christmas has a tremendous significance – which makes all the superficial, worldly celebration with its tinsel and artificial glitter, pale into a very cheap and tawdry thing. Instead of mankind being rejected by God because of its self-centred disobedience working its way towards total destruction, the birth of Jesus the Saviour brought the possibility of forgiveness and love and life to those who will accept the offer of redemption. Not only may we be redeemed, or bought back from the power of evil, but we have also offered to us the grace of the Holy Spirit to enable us to live confidently and triumphantly the life of a true follower of Christ. There is so much fear in our lives, and so much tension, and so much stress! And it should not be like that. Secure in the knowledge of the love of God, the strength of the Holy Spirit and the redemption of Jesus, we ought to be able to face and overcome all that this world can confront us with.

But ..... our faith is so weak. We need to start again at the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, with John the Baptist. The place to start again is with repentance. And this is a matter of urgency. We do not know how long we have to get it right. This is what Peter is saying in the Epistle Reading for today: "Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming day of God?" (2 Peter 3:1

After the call to repentance comes the promise of a Redeemer and Saviour: "I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." Even so, come Lord Jesus. **AMEN**

In answer to the question: "Who are you?", put to him by the priests and Levites, John the Baptist replied: "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said." By quoting just that one little piece from Isaiah, John was reminding those scholars and religious men of all that the great prophet had said at that time. Much of the 40th chapter of the Book of Isaiah is familiar to those who enjoy hearing Handel's "Messiah" which is so frequently performed in this pre-Christmas period. It was one Charles Jennens who selected those inspiring words for Handel to set to great music. That chapter is worth reading again as part of our pre-Christmas preparation. Let me quote a little of it. "The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness: Prepare ye the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low and the crooked shall be made straight and the rough places plain; and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the voice of the Lord hath spoken it. Behold, the Lord our God will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him: behold, his reward is with him, and his work is before him. He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young."

It is the promise of a great and mighty God coming in gentleness and with love to the help of his people in their confusion - lost in the wilderness of worldliness and sin. It is a call to men and women to participate under God's leadership in the bringing of peace and justice to a confused and bewildered and sinful and disobedient world. But alas, the world is not yet peaceably ordered; we do not always joyfully serve God; there is not much godly quietness about, even in our own hearts and minds. The world is very much a spiritual wilderness, as it was in Isaiah's day, and in John the Baptist's day. As long as humanity ignores and rejects God it will continue to be so. When people want peace but cannot be sure that their proposed programmes won't add to the international tensions, instead of easing them - they are in that spiritual wilderness.

When people want to improve their social, education and employment situations, and find themselves confused by costs and demands and programmes - they are in that spiritual wilderness. When 2 parents try to develop healthy family life and find confusing society pressures in the process - they know what a spiritual wilderness is. When you and I find ourselves beset with doubts and fears in our personal lives and careers, and we find ourselves wondering whether it is all worthwhile - here too is that spiritual wilderness. Beyond all our knowledge, our ingenuity, our human attributes, our special individual capabilities, we need the knowledge and the reassurance of the love and forgiveness of God if the mixed-up pieces of life's jigsaw are to be arranged into an intelligible pattern. Isaiah's vision of the highway of God is a promise that the Lord of heaven and earth is directly interested in the human situation, and calls us into partnership with himself. "Make straight the way of the Lord as the prophet Isaiah said" is the challenge of John the Baptist and is still intensely appropriate today.

interested in the human situation, and calls us into partnership with himself. "Make straight the way of the Lord as the prophet Isaiah said" is the challenge of John the Baptist and is still intensely appropriate today.

The part of the Book of Isaiah from which the quotation comes was written during the exile of the Jewish people in Babylon, and the promise refers to the new opportunity about to be offered to them by God, following the overthrow of the Babylonians by the Persians. The captives would be returning to their homeland, the Holy Land, and would have the opportunity to respond to God's loving care by the quality of their individual and community life. The fact that it did not turn out that way does not deny the reality and truth of the vision. It only points out that it is always easy to turn from the best to the inferior when the inferior is cheaper or more convenient. We are tempted to do this every day in every aspect of life.

John the Baptist took Isaiah's vision and applied it to the world of his own day. The new opportunity was harder to see. The Romans were tightening their control of Palestinian affairs. The religion had degenerated into a code of behaviour, rather than providing a source of spiritual awareness and peace. Yet John could see opportunity for spiritual transformation just because of the difficulties of the times. Since men and women were in a spiritual wilderness, and since so many of them were unhappy about it, here was a chance to break through with a new proclamation of God's loving purpose, in which all were invited to share. Even though most people missed the point, John's vision was real, and enough people understood to provide a nucleus with which Jesus could begin his work. The problem of the wilderness was solved - but not many grasped the solution. The world still needs Christ, not just now and then at historical periods of time, or in times of personal crisis, but all the time. Every time we face a real decision; every time we pass through one of life's critical transitions; every time we are forced to adjust to the pressure of outside circumstances; every time we are tempted to lower our standard we need Christ. Just when our awareness of being in a spiritual wilderness becomes most intense, the Christ becomes most available to those whose eyes are open to see him; whose hearts are responsive to his forgiving love and the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

But Christ comes, not just to set our minds at peace, or to solve our problems, or that the course of this world may be peaceably ordered, as ends in themselves. He calls us into active partnership with God in building the royal highway in the wilderness, so that his Church, his people, may joyfully serve him. As he calls us and offers us the opportunity and the challenge, he also offers himself, through the Holy Spirit, as foreman, as chief engineer, as spiritual supply officer, as we undertake our part in the building of the highway of God in the wilderness of modern life. At this time of the year, particularly, the Church echoes the challenge of John the Baptist: "Make straight in the desert a highway for our God." That challenge must not go unanswered. By the way in which we - each one of us - prepare for and celebrate the anniversary of the Birth of the Saviour, we will be undertaking our part, our share our responsibility, in the mighty work of preparing the Way of the Lord in the spiritual wilderness of our world. **AMEN**

"The angel said to Mary: The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore, the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God." (Luke 1:35)

The expectancy of the pre-Christmas Season of Advent is nearly over and we are almost ready to rejoice again on the Birthday of the Saviour. Before we do though, it is appropriate that we look at the one whose co-operation with the will of God was so perfect and willing that the Incarnation became possible. I mean of course the Lord's mother, the Blessed Virgin Mary. We do not know what she looked like, even though no other woman in the history of the world has been portrayed more than Mary has. All painting and sculpture has originated in the minds of the artists; we do not really know what she looked like. But she was

intelligent. It is difficult to see how she could have spoken the words of the Magnificat unless she was highly intelligent: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour." Even in translation from Aramaic to Greek to Latin to ancient English to modern English, it has lost little or none of its beauty and power. Maybe the words were put into her mouth by St. Luke - who was not there at the time! - but whichever way you look at it, Mary has been presented to us as a woman of exceptional intelligence. And she taught Jesus. Think how well Jesus knew the Scriptures - not all His learning would have come from the synagogue school he attended as a child. Think of the searching questions Jesus must have asked His mother as He grew in stature and wisdom! I think Mary's intelligence would have shown in her face, in her eyes. I think too that pain would early have begun to add character to Mary's face - not mere physical pain, but the

pain of a mother's knowledge and fear of a beloved son's destiny. A general complaint about the faces of those who enter "Miss Australia" and "Miss World" contests used to be that they were too like "Barbie" dolls, devoid of character. It was not easy being the mother of Jesus. When a genius is born into a family, the

tormenting question for the mother is what will become of him. And at the very outset, when Jesus was only a few weeks old, Simeon, with the discernment of long years of experience said: "This child is destined to be a sign which men reject; and you too will be pierced to the heart." Not the sort of thing you usually say to a young mother! But so it turned out. In the end Mary saw her son nailed to a cross like some criminal. She was no mother if she didn't wonder how much better things might have turned out, if only Jesus had stayed a carpenter, stayed at Nazareth, never got caught up in religion and politics.

But I don't think that Mary's eyes were either bitter or rebellious, as are the eyes of many women - and men - who see dreadful things done around them, and to them. We don't have to wonder much about this one, for she quietly accepted in trust, all that lay ahead of her: "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." This attitude makes for a strong and

sympathetic face - the kind you can't help noticing. Let Mary be well recognised by us as a woman above all others. Mary was human, and not a goddess to be worshipped. But let us not be slow in giving her all honour as her due. Mary bore Jesus; and His birth in conditions intolerable today, are glamorised and made to appear unreal. Behind the tinsel and artificial snow and the stylised stable, there is a real story; and the real story includes a mother who was truly beautiful with all the depth of meaning that word can carry, because she accepted trustingly what came to her in life, painful though it was.

So the girl who was the mother of Jesus set up for all time the pattern of the proper reaction to life, lived by what we know as the Christian standard. That is, to change what ought to be changed and what can be changed, and to accept what cannot be changed as somehow being within the providence of God. This is the theme of the prayer used by Alcoholics Anonymous: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference."

The principle of acceptance of the will of God, and the preparedness to change what can be changed, in His strength and inspiration, is the secret of peace in life, of strength of character, of attractiveness of personality and even appearance. It is a principle we do well to learn.

What have we to accept? Older people have to accept that they have grown older, that their life-span is nearly completed. Many people find that very difficult. There is the inability to do things once delighted in. There is a failing of energy, sight, hearing, and muscle. Those in middle life have to accept that they are not likely to be as successful as they expected and hoped. There is the burden of responsibility - at work; with children taking up their own lives; with ageing and sometimes dependent parents. Younger people have to accept the growing realization that life will not go all their way, and that they have to carry the results of their own choices and mistakes. That ideals receive rough handling in an unsympathetic world.

But none of us - old, middle aged, or young - must abandon the struggle. We must not assume that nothing can be or ought to be changed. To refuse to adapt and change is to die prematurely. Yet some things cannot be changed - we must learn the principle of godly acceptance. This is not resigning oneself to Fate - Fate is an impersonal and non-caring force. Acceptance involves believing that we are in the hands of a God who cares so much that Jesus called Him Father and lived by that belief. So did His mother, Mary. She said: "Be it unto me according to Thy word", to use the old phrase. There is no more Christian attitude to life than this, and in practice it turns out to be exceedingly constructive and satisfying. **AMEN**

## **CHRISTMAS EVE or DAY, Year B 25th December 2008 Responsibility: Canon Barlow**

"In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it."

From the introduction to St. John's Gospel, where he looks past the details of the birth of Jesus to its cosmic implications. Those of you who have, or who have had, small children, will be familiar with the cry in the night: "Mummy - or Daddy - put the light on." And when you do, and the little pattering feet arrive at your bedside, so often you find that it was some nameless fear which has caused the kiddie to cry out. Some fear which is put to flight as soon as the light shows that there is nothing there to be afraid of. Or else there is the plea at bedtime: "Leave the light on", and the child happily drops off to sleep, feeling secure amid the familiar surroundings. And let's not dismiss fear of the dark as just a childish thing. There are plenty of places in the world where it is not safe to walk at night, for fear of what the darkness might conceal. Illness and distress, anxiety and uncertainty are always far worse at night, through the long hours of darkness. Yes, the darkness has its fears.

But so too., though in a different way, so too has the daylight its fears. There is much in the world that is evil and frightening, so much to make us afraid. Many people this Christmas are fearing the future, with the threat of losing their jobs; many fear for the life and health of loved ones; many fear the current economic situation; many fear death itself: the list of our fears is endless, and always they close in to make us toss and turn and fret at night, in the dark.

And now on this day, Christmas Day, we are again reminded that there is a Light for our darkness, which shines on for ever, and which the darkness cannot extinguish. The angel said to the shepherds: "fear not - unto you is born this day a Saviour." He might have meant: "Don't be afraid of me." Such a visitation would be a scary thing! But I think we may also apply those words in a wider sense: A Saviour has been born who will bring hope to the world, replacing our fearfulness. We do not know exactly when Jesus was born. Not the month, or even for certain the year! It might have been 4 B.C. - sounds odd, but since our method of dating time began, experts have re-assessed the probable date of the great census of the Roman Empire. One thing we do know for certain: Christ was born at night, in the dark. There was I suppose a little flickering oil lamp pushing the shadows back to loom and move threateningly from the corners of the stable. And "there were shepherds abiding in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night." Yes, Christ was born in the dark.

Why ARE we afraid of the dark? Isn't it because we cannot see where we are going; and WHAT might be out there; and WHO might be out there? The future is dark - we don't know what is out there next week, next month, next year - or even tomorrow. Perhaps it's just as well - worrying about the unknown is bad enough and very often our fears are groundless anyway. To see clearly into the future might help us win bets on horses and even the Wheel of Fortune, but mostly we would give up in the face of difficulties and problems, instead of going on to meet the problems as they crop up.

The message of Christmas is this: Out there in the dark, whatever else there may be, out in the dark there is Christ. Do you know these lines by Minnie Louise Haskell - the quote was used by King George the VIth in his Christmas broadcast in 1939, just after the outbreak of World War II.

*"I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year: Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown. And he replied: Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way! So I went forth and finding the hand of God, trod gladly into the night. And he led me towards the hills and the breaking of the day in the lone east."*

Jesus said: "I am the light of the world." And "I am the Way."

The darkness, the unknown, holds terrors for us all - Christmas reminds us that Christ is there too if we will only look and see. And where He is, the darkness is pushed back. "The Light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it." And that is how we are to think of Christ. He is a light in the dark, that never goes out. A light in the dark, which removes the terror from the dark. A light we should fix our eyes upon whenever the clouds gather and night begins to close in.

A youngster was once asked to define what it meant to be religious. "Oh," he said, "there are things you mustn't do, like cheating and lying and swearing and using dirty talk." Then he paused and said, "No it's not, it's waking up in the middle of the night and remembering you belong to God, and turning over and going to sleep again happy because of it."

"The Light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it." I invite you to take this knowledge to heart this Christmas. Christ came in the dark so that we should never wholly fear what is dark to us again. There IS darkness in the world. Quite often there is darkness in the human heart. But we will not be overwhelmed if we keep our eyes on that light which is Christ. There is no Christless dark anywhere --He is there if we look, and the dark is never so dark again. "We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ ..... God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God."

"O come, let us adore Him!"

**AMEN**

## FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS 1 - YEAR B 28th December

**Responsibility: Canon Barlow**

It is fitting that the theme of the Sunday after Christmas Day should be "The Family".

It is clearly the intention of the compilers of the 3-year Cycle of Readings that the life of the Holy Family should be before us at this time while the celebrations of the Birth of Jesus are still in our minds. For while there is natural joy and elation at the birth of a desired child, yet immediately, the new parents become aware of responsibility for the child. I am sorry to have to put in the word "desired", but that has to be the qualification on this occasion. For I am speaking of family life, and that implies a situation where each child is loved and has his or her part of the family. Undesired infants are a nuisance or an embarrassment to the parents, and frequently become battered babies. The luckier ones are adopted, and thus become desired infants, and accordingly, loved and cherished.

And so Mary and Joseph immediately took up their responsibilities towards their child. No doubt Joseph's first concern was to move Mary and the Babe to better conditions, and St. Matthew records that the Wise Men visited the Child in a house. Then there were the religious responsibilities. After eight days the Child was circumcised and named, according to religious requirement. Circumcision was - and still is for Jews today - the ineradicable marking of a Jewish boy-child, a requirement going back to the time of Abraham is a sign of the covenant made between him and his descendants and God. The name "Jesus" was a fairly common one with its variant form "Joshua", and means "God saves" or "God is with us."

From earliest times, it was considered that the first of anything belonged to God. The first fruits of the harvest, the first-born calf, lamb, or kid, were solemnly given as a sacrificial offering. Similarly the first-born son of a Jewish family was considered to be God's servant who should by rights serve Him as a priest or in some other special way. As for example, Samuel in the Old Testament and John the Baptist in the New. Since Bethlehem is quite close to Jerusalem, Joseph and Mary took the opportunity of bringing Jesus to the Temple for the Presentation ceremony shortly after His birth.

The next responsibility of Joseph, particularly, was the safety of the Infant Jesus and His mother. Herod the Great, the puppet-king ruling Palestine on behalf of Rome, was desperately jealous of his power, and afraid lest he lose it, and he ruthlessly destroyed any suspected threat. He went so far as to have his mother-in-law, two of his sons, and his favourite wife (he had nine others) murdered, because he suspected their loyalty. The massacre of the Bethlehem male infants in an endeavour to get Jesus, is entirely in keeping with historical records. But Joseph was warned in a dream, and the Holy Family fled to Egypt, until they learned that the danger was past - King Herod had died. Then they returned to Nazareth, in the northern province of Galilee: "and the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favour of God was upon Him", as Luke tells us. We tend to get stuck at Bethlehem in our thinking

about Christmas, at that stylised, glamourised stable. I have deliberately gone on this morning, with some of the events which followed, events which are all too often overlooked. And which certainly the many people who appear in church at Christmas and Easter, and at hardly any other time, completely miss. Yet these are highly significant and important aspects of our Lord's early infant life. For life goes on immediately after a birth, and we are reminded of our own problems and responsibilities in family life as we consider those of Joseph and Mary. We can be helped in coping with our own problems and responsibilities as we consider how they coped. , Mary, on being told she was to be the mother of the Son of God was able to say: "I am the handmaid of the Lord, let it be to me according to your word." Joseph, on learning that his fiancée was pregnant and not by him, accepted the angel's assurance that "that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit."

And so on, in those difficult days of the journey to Bethlehem, the crude surroundings of the Birth, and the fearful flight to Egypt. And the overwhelmingly puzzling worship of their child by shepherds, angels, Magi, old Simeon and Anna. They placed their simple faith and trust in God; made the offerings required by the ancient religious Law; and quietly returned to Nazareth to bring up the Child entrusted to them. What an example for us! It is after all, the family environment which plays the major part in shaping the physical, mental, moral, and spiritual maturity of a child as it grows. We teach our children day by day, and they absorb it unconsciously in the way we act, relate to other people within and without the family, by our integrity, and whether our standards are genuine, or false. Many of the mixed-up children and young people of today are the result of parents holding a double standard with regard to morals and religious principles. "Do as I say, not as I do." It doesn't work.

For some of us it is too late - the children are grown and have left home, for better or for worse. For others of us, the children are still growing and there is still time. But we can all, and all must, look for and work for and pray for Christian home-life blessed by God and typified by that of the Holy Family.

AMEN