



Advent Sunday
25th November 2007

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Isaiah 2:1-5; Romans 13:9-14; Matthew 24:36-44

As some of you know, I am something of a fan of that quirky home-grown Australian prophet, Michael Leunig. Leunig's newspaper cartoons puncture our hard shell of self-sufficiency, pricking the bubble of pompous self-importance, naming our smug provincialism, confronting the brutality of the global village, recalling us all to half-remembered human and spiritual values. He loves drawing little men gazing up at the night sky, often completely alone, keeping company with no one but the crescent moon and the stars, and usually with flowers at their feet. The text in one of these says a very limited period of time is coming when no festival, celebration or major event will be making a claim on our existence.

"Perhaps it could be called 'ordinary time' or 'peace' or 'ordinary life'. It has no official name. It may not last very long. Perhaps you will also hear a bird sing or a spoon move in a bowl or a person whistling over the back fence or the sound of pruning secateurs on a rose bush. Who knows. There will be no fireworks, nor will there be a release of doves or balloons; nor will there be 'special offers' of any kind, and no information hot-line. There will be no media coverage; no commentary or analysis. It will all pass unremarked upon. Are you ready?"

This is the voice of the prophet because this simple truth, this common or garden, ordinary insight, is what we are mostly too proud, too busy, too preoccupied, or too sophisticated to see. And not least at Christmas, which is why this special four-week Advent season is so precious and potent. As everything speeds up and spins into a frenzy, we who follow the way of Christ are given an oasis of quiet, of beauty, of poetry and mystery to regularly refresh our sanity.

Sunday by Sunday we step out of the rat-race - to touch the life-giving waters of the font, to sit around the camp-fire of the Advent wreath telling the ancient stories of faith. Sunday by Sunday we gather around the eucharistic table, here to remember who we are and whose we are. And this is simply religious language for something quite commonplace, quite ordinary. This is religious language for what is going on in us when we hear bird song, or the sound of a spoon in a bowl, or someone whistling over the back fence, or pruning secateurs on a rose bush. In this holy place eyes are opened to everything holy. So let us not make the mistake of looking for God outside ourselves or beyond our everyday world. For we are all the time looking directly at God's image and likeness, only we are too

embarrassed or ashamed or smug to recognise it. God is all the time coming to us, adventing among us, crossing our path, interrupting our day.

I remember seeing pictures of some huge banners. I guess they must have been about a metre and a half wide and five or six metres in length, and they successfully turned a pretty featureless sports stadium into a worship space. Each banner appeared to be a random collage of faces - young and old, women and men and children, white and coloured, some smiling, some in pain, some hopeful, some despairing, some straight, some gay, some overfed, others dying of starvation. The same four words were written across the foot of

each banner: 'The face of God'. When God looks at me through your eyes I can be myself as I really am, without apology, without fear. When I see you as God sees you, sees you for the unique and sacred individual you are, you are freed to be real and true, relaxed and content.

'But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.' Today's strange apocalyptic gospel is not really giving us secret information about the end time, accurately predicting some terrible future. The lurid language simply highlights what is happening or not happening all the time, what can happen now if only we will allow it. Like the eerie light before a thunderstorm, transforming the familiar landscape, transforming our vision, we can suddenly see as if for the first time what has been there all along. It happens when we least expect it, it is like a thief in the night, for none of us knows on what day our Lord is coming. The advents of God take place all the time, always without fireworks or balloons, or media coverage or commentary or analysis – and all too often, without us even noticing. But it need not be like this. Perhaps you will hear a bird sing or someone whistling, perhaps a stranger smiles at you in the street, maybe you inadvertently speak a kind word to someone needing a friend.

'Are you ready?', Michael Leunig asks.

'Keep awake', says Jesus.



Second Sunday of Advent

2nd December 2007

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Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

The two middle Sundays of Advent are always taken up with stories of that dangerous figure John the Baptizer. The familiar texts work on several levels, and I find it hard to know exactly what to make of them.

Part of me is happy simply to let the strong poetry flow over me and carry me along in its flood. The kingdom of heaven undoubtedly comes near in the magnificent suggestive language. The exotic figure dressed in camel's hair, with his curious diet of locusts and wild honey, sounds rather romantic, although I dare say the attraction wore off pretty quickly when you got within sniffing distance – John was probably as high as a kite. If that didn't do it, things certainly turn sour when he opens his mouth. His winning way with the Pharisees and Saducees, that brood of vipers as he calls them, has an almost comic edge to our ears, even if it was terrifying to them. The call to repentance, to a real change of heart, if you will excuse the pun, is obviously not for the faint-hearted. And the call is urgent; there is no time for careful consideration. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees. We stumble on a time for decision, a time for decisive action.

Then the drama is cranked up another notch. If you think John is frightening, try the Coming One, the One who is still out of sight, hidden to our eyes, beyond the horizon, whose sandals John is not even worthy to carry. John baptizes with water, the muddy water of the Jordan, but the mystery man will baptize with Holy Spirit and fire. He sounds more of a devil than a

god, more threat than promise. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. And yet this is supposed to be good news, and I think perhaps it is when we set emotion on one side and let the text work on its rational level. Beneath the special effects, what is really going on here?

It seems John was baptizing in the sense of taking his fellow Jews out into the wilderness, across the Jordan, then bringing them back through the waters into the promised land. Their repentance, their heart-change, their essentially individual and secret conversion, is acted out physically and publicly. Leaving Egypt all over again, we see them wandering lost in the desert places, entering with delight the land of milk and honey, accepting their status as God's chosen people as if for the first time. Their faithlessness is matched by God's faithfulness, their wavering swallowed up in God's constancy. Repentance really is a fresh start; it means turning around, knowing what makes for peace, facing toward home.

Something wonderful is happening here, something truly life-giving, something life-enhancing, and yet the tone of voice remains harsh. The Coming One does embody good news, indeed is himself good news, and yet John's voice remains a voice from the past, not the voice of the future. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn in inextinguishable fire. Yes, this will happen alright - and the brutal dictators of Burma and power-crazed politicians everywhere had better believe it - but it cannot happen in the way John imagines, by meeting force with force, violence with violence. It happens only in the manner of those defenceless Buddhist monks marching silently in the streets of Rangoon with their rice bowls upturned. Even as they are rounded up and murdered in the night, they are winning the argument, the illegal government has lost and they have won. It happens mysteriously, against all the odds, in the patient selflessness of that extraordinary Christ-figure of our own time, Aung San Suu Kyi. A prisoner in her own home, she remains free; silenced, she speaks still with rare power; a shining light just so long as she continues to find grace to match hate and fear with love and hope.

John the Baptizer saw the future, but not very clearly. He told the truth, but not very fully. For the God who comes, the Christlike God, the only God there is, comes quietly, gently, persistently, persuasively. And the Christlike God comes without fanfare, disguised, anonymous. In this God there is no condemnation, only compassion. In this God there is no violence at all, only the unstoppable power of love, and while the crucified may not clench a defiant fist, the crucified wins in the end simply by gathering hearts. Repent, then, for the kingdom of heaven comes near. Repent, and bear fruit worthy of repentance.



Third Sunday of Advent

9th December 2004

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Isaiah 35:1-10; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

Last Sunday John the Baptizer could hardly have sounded more authoritative or more confident. "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with Holy Spirit

and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." Well, not so today. Today John is having second thoughts; or perhaps we should say final thoughts, as he is in prison fearing for his life. Prison tends to concentrate the mind wonderfully. Perhaps he has been perplexed for a long time, perhaps he was prepared to sit back and watch and wait, but now he needs to know if he's backed the right horse or not. "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Well might John ask. After all, the One he welcomed so confidently at the Jordan and proclaimed so authoritatively as God's mighty warrior against human fear and failure has turned out to be something of a wimp, something of a bleeding heart, a gentle giant. It seems John saw the future, but not very clearly. Yes, he told the truth, but not very fully. In a marvellous piece, the American novelist and theologian Fred Buechner spells this out forcefully, more forcefully than anyone else I know.

"John the Baptist didn't fool around. He lived in the wilderness around the Dead Sea. He subsisted on a starvation diet, and so did his disciples. He wore clothes that even the rummage sale people wouldn't have handled. When he preached, it was fire and brimstone every time. The Kingdom was coming all right, he said, but if you thought it was going to be a pink tea, you'd better think again. If you didn't shape up God would give you the axe like an elm with the blight or toss you into the incinerator like what's left over when you've lambasted the good out of the wheat. He said being a Jew wouldn't get you any more points than being a Hottentot, and one of his favourite ways of addressing his congregation was as a snake pit. Your only hope, he said, was to clean up your life as if your life depended on it, which it did, and get baptized in a hurry as a sign that you had.

"One day who should show up but Jesus. John knew who he was in a second. 'You're the one who should be baptizing me', he said, but Jesus insisted, and so they waded out into the Jordan together, and it was John who did the honors.

"John apparently had second thoughts about him later on, however, and it's no great wonder. Where John preached grim justice and pictured God as a steely-eyed thresher of grain, Jesus preached forgiving love and pictured God as the host at a marvelous party or a father who can't bring himself to throw his children out even when they spit in his eye. Where John said people had better save their skins before it was too late, Jesus said it was God who saved their skins, and even if you blew your whole bankroll on liquor and sex like the Prodigal Son, it still wasn't too late. Where John ate locusts and honey in the wilderness with the church crowd, Jesus ate what he felt like in Jerusalem with as sleazy a bunch as you could expect to find. Where John crossed to the other side of the street if he saw any sinners heading his way, Jesus seems to have preferred their company to the Womens' Christian Temperance Union, the Stewardship Committee, and the World Council of Churches rolled into one. Where John baptized, Jesus healed. Finally John decided to settle the thing once and for all and sent a couple of his disciples to put it to Jesus straight. 'John wants to know if you're the One we've been waiting for or whether we should cool our heels a while longer.' Jesus said, 'You go tell John what you've seen around here. Tell him there are people who have sold their seeing-eye dogs and taken up bird-watching. Tell him there are people who've traded in aluminum walkers for hiking boots. Tell him the down-and-out have turned into the up-and-coming and a lot of dead-beats are living it up for the first time in their lives. And three cheers for the one who can swallow all this without gagging.'"¹

Well, the fact of the matter is, some do gag. Some did take offence way back then, and some do so still. John's disciples were around for a long time after his bloody death, faithful to their master, faithful to his vision of the steely-eyed God, the grim reaper meeting out justice left, right, and centre. Eventually, however, they disappeared – or so the historians tell us. But I wonder? I wonder if they didn't just become Christians of a particularly narrow stripe? For the puritans and the wowsers and the purity freaks are with us still. Indeed, they think they have the numbers and the money to take us over just at present, and there is no end to their bully-boy tactics because they passionately believe the end justifies the means.

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who* (New York: Harper 1979) pp. 71-3

So hardly a day goes past when they are not throwing their weight around and shouting their heads off, proving by everything they say and do that they are indeed followers of John rather than Jesus. Not that I want to damn them too quickly, for there is something of this in all of us. It springs from our need to order our messy lives and control our messy world. It arises in our anxiety and fear. And Jesus' vision of God as the host of a marvellous party, a father who can't bring himself to throw his children out even when they spit in his eye, scares the living daylights out of us. Because this God is no solution; this God is part of the problem. Yet this God, and this God alone, is the one who comes. This God alone, because there is no other. Instead of John's pitchforking judge we get a helpless baby. We get a wandering story-teller, a travelling healer, someone who brings out the best even in the worst of us, someone absolutely terrifying because he loves us even when we know there is nothing lovable about us at all. In the end, we get a man nailed up like a placard between two thieves, left to die in the sun, the wood of the cradle the wood of the cross cut from the same tree. Like it for not, here is God, the only true God, the merciful, the compassionate, who confounds all our expectations. Here is God who alone is worthy of worship and service, not some idol made in our own image, crafted according to our need. "Truly, I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."