

Second Sunday of Advent

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Introduction

An overall introduction to the Advent 2020 readings

One of our general principles in producing the weekly reflections for the Spirituality of Conflict project has been to avoid tying these too tightly to events current at the time of writing. Earlier this year however [the introduction to our Holy Week reflections](#) noted that in the light of the Covid19 pandemic it seemed wrong ‘*to blithely write as though this were a Holy Week ‘like any other’; and indeed now, more than ever, we need the wisdom embedded in the multi-levelled and richly textured narratives of the Gospels to challenge, comfort and guide us.*’

That seems to be even more true of this Advent as we face renewed waves of infection with further lockdowns and restrictions, huge political upheavals around the world, and multiple uncertainties about what the next weeks and months will bring for us all. Never has the question “what is left of the night?” – asked of the watchman in Isaiah 21– seemed more pressing; never has the ambiguous reply of “Morning is coming, but also the night” seemed more resonant.

Advent, the season of waiting, is also a time of watching – of looking and attending – and the Advent readings for Year B all tell us something about aspects of this very human activity. The questions they point us toward and which weave back and forth through the texts – *How do we look? Where are we looking? What or who are we looking at? Why are we looking? What do we do with our seeing?* – are all pertinent ones for this time when so much is going on, as well as for us to consider in the context of developing a spirituality of conflict. Looking for God, for the signs of their Kingdom, is an essential element of an Incarnational spirituality and praxis.

Thus whilst not referring directly to the pandemic or other current events, these reflections are nevertheless influenced by them. Our hope is that, alongside our ongoing project of exploring conflict generally, they might also support reflection on the particular conflicts which the events of 2020 have exposed or heightened, as well as on our own responses and what we might need to amend, celebrate or strengthen in these. This too seems a very appropriate way of keeping Advent – of watching and waiting and encountering God’s light in unexpected places and in ways which are sometimes comforting, sometimes challenging but always illuminating.

Advent 2: Where are we looking?

Mark's account of Jesus starts in a very different way to that of his fellow Evangelists: there are no staid genealogies embedding him in a particular history; no startling birth narratives to establish his heavenly status; no sweeping poetry extolling his cosmic ontology. However Mark's beginning does give us an early indication of something which will be a key theme in his Gospel and it leads us to the second of our Advent questions about looking. Last week we considered 'How?' ... what is the *nature* of our looking? This week our focus will be on 'Where?' ... what is the *direction* of our gaze?

Preparation

Either

Find a famous image with which you are reasonably familiar – perhaps a well-known painting or an iconic photograph. Spend some time looking at it but paying attention only to what is going on around the edges or in the less eye-catching parts. What do you notice? Does it change how you read or understand the image? In what way?

Or

Watch a few scenes from a movie you know well but instead of looking at the central action, make yourself attend to what is happening out of centre shot or at the edges of the frame (this can be quite difficult to do!) Do you notice anything you haven't been aware of before? Does it add anything/change anything about the way you see the scene or the bigger narrative? In what way?

Text

Mark 1:1–8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way;

the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’”

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals."

I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Comment

Some of the strangeness of the start of Mark's Gospel is probably lost on us because we know who 'John the baptiser' is – but imagine for a moment that we did not have the accounts of Luke and John to fill in the background information which Mark totally fails to provide. What we would then have is a smattering of Prophetic allusions, an alien environment, an eccentric figure, and a somewhat Delphic announcement! Not perhaps what we might expect for 'the beginning of the good news'. However this is simply the first taste of the overthrow of expectations which permeates Mark's Gospel and it points us towards the second of our Advent 'looking' questions – that of 'Where?'

One of the ways which Mark concentrates his readers' attention is to use a literary device known as *inclusio*. This bracketing technique uses a repeated key word or phrase to mark the beginning and end of a section of the narrative and to indicate the purpose and focus of the intervening passage. In fact Mark does this on a large scale for his whole Gospel: the announcement here in verse 1 that it is about 'Jesus Christ, the Son of God', and its echo in the Centurion's comment (15:39) that "Truly, this man was God's Son" underline that everything which Mark writes has the aim of helping his hearers (including us) see the hidden truth about Jesus. He wants them to look at Jesus properly – with the deep, collected looking we discussed last week – because only then will they understand *who* he is and *what* his Messiahship actually entails.

Today's passage raises the critical question, to which Mark repeatedly returns, of *where* we need to look if we want to see God and find his Messiah at work. Mark is not governed by our chapter/verse conventions (or liturgical seasons!) so our Gospel reading is actually part of the longer section (vv1–15) which is bookended (in Mark's opening statement and his first recorded speech for Jesus) with a reference to *eangelion* – 'the good news'. Once again the use of an *inclusio* alerts us to the fact that Mark is using this opening section to set out something, or some things, which are important elements of this 'good news of Jesus Christ'. His use of prophetic fragments from Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Malachi make it clear that it is not 'the good news' *itself* which is unexpected – on the contrary this is what the Jewish people have long been anticipating in the light of God's past actions as recorded in their sacred texts.

What is strange and startling however is the location in which it is unfolding. Of course the desert had a strong tradition of being a place for encounter with the divine but expectations about the Messiah, deeply rooted in the history of the Jewish people with its episodes of conquest, exile, oppression and occupation, were of a triumphant figure who would destroy Israel's enemies and free and restore Jerusalem. So for Mark to situate 'the beginning' at a place on the margins, rather than in Jerusalem, where the national, cultural, religious, and political identity of the nation were fused and guarded, is unexpected and disconcerting. Verse 5 further underscores this counterintuitive flow of movement – it was not just people from the countryside around who came to John, but people from Jerusalem, from the *centre* itself, who travelled to the rim to see what was happening. And although the baptism of Jesus himself is beyond our remit today, it's worth noting that this

too, with its accompanying theophany, takes place at an edge (the Jordan was the boundary marker for the promised land); moreover Jesus – the locus of the ultimate revelation about God – must go even further into the wilderness to find its confirmation.

This removal of God from the centre to the margins occurs throughout Mark's Gospel and is one of his key points: the Kingdom of God and its Messiah are consistently NOT where people are looking or expecting to find them. This is sometimes inextricably linked to the issue of *what* people are looking for – a question we will consider in Advent 3 – but the theme plays out in a variety of other ways too. Mark's Jesus is constantly to be found doing the work of the Kingdom not amongst the powerful and elite but amongst those on the edges: people tortured by demons (1:23–28; 5: 1–14; 7: 24–30; 9: 14–29); those with leprosy or other physical problems (1: 32–4; 40 –45; 2: 1–12; 3: 1–6; 5: 25–34; 7: 31–7; 8: 22–6; 10: 46–52); tax collectors/sinners (2: 13–17); and children (10: 13–16) Moreover it is usually characters at the margins – women (14:8), beggars (10:46), soldiers (15:49), demons (1:34; 5:7), gentiles (7: 24–30) – and not those at the heart of religious or national identity, who see Jesus properly and recognise and acknowledge him for what he is.

For Mark, seeing Jesus properly thus requires not only that we deepen and develop the *quality* of our looking, but also that we attend intentionally to the *direction* of our gaze: we need to be aware that sometimes we have to consciously de-centre this and start looking in other than what seem to us to be the obvious or the logical places. Mark ends his Gospel by making the point explicitly: the original (shorter) ending details no encounters with the risen Jesus; instead it describes the women going to the tomb to find and tend to Jesus' remains only to be told “you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; *he is not here ...he is going ahead of you to Galilee*”. Once again, and in more ways than one, says Mark, people were looking in the wrong place for God.

Today's Gospel passage therefore gives us another angle from which to examine our looking in situations of conflict (and more generally) as we travel through the watching season of Advent: when we are trying to increase our understanding, or to find signs of hope, change etc., *where* are we directing our gaze – and is this the right or the best place? Some possible questions for exploring this are suggested below. Once again these are intended not as rods with which we can punish ourselves, but to help us more consciously and critically examine our practice and amend, strengthen, and celebrate it as appropriate.

Response

You might like to consider one or more of the following questions with respect to a specific conflict situation in which you are involved, to things which are currently happening in public life which you find concerning or challenging, or more generally to your 2020 Advent preparations.

To what extent do I think about where I am looking when I'm seeking for answers, deeper understandings, solutions, possibilities of change etc.? Does this matter? What things might help me to be more consciously attentive to this aspect of my practice of looking?

What sort of things influence or determine where I direct my gaze? Have I missed or misread something because I've been looking in the wrong direction or place? Is this an area where I need to be more, or more critically, self-aware? If so, what strategies might help me with this?

Do I ever consciously look to non-obvious or counterintuitive places when I am trying to deepen understanding or find solutions? If so, does it add anything? If I don't, what is it that stops me?

Prayer

Jesus –
our sometimes
discomforting brother,

too often
we look for you
only in the places
which seem to us
to be sensible
or safe.

May we always be
foolish enough
and brave enough
to also look for you,
and for the signs of your kingdom,
in the counter-intuitive
and at the margins –

those places where
you
have always been at home
and about God's work.
Amen