

Third Sunday of Advent

12.12.2021
By Pádraig Ó Tuama

Introduction

In an era where 'church growth' is the subject of many seminars (and even more so in a time of pandemic where many people – both parishioners and clergy – are evaluating their relationship with church attendance) there can be a lot of anxiety about numbers, about member-care, about how to provide multiple layers of belonging for congregations.

This is understandable. And I think that much of this is done for good reasons.

But the readings this week seem to show John the Baptist doing everything he can to confront people who come to him. They are following him into the wilderness. They are hungry, open. He calls them snakes and challenges them about their money.

John the Baptist's words amplify conflict, perhaps even necessary conflict. For him, participation in the community of practice and belief is demanding, and he makes no attempt or apology to soothe the conflicts he causes in his followers.

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*Before we read the text – we'd like to invite you to join us on Zoom on the four Sundays of Advent at 5.30pm Irish time (that's 12.30pm Eastern time USA). We'll be in conversation about the [Spirituality of Conflict](#) book, with four of the writers from the project. Registration is required, and is – of course – free. [You can register here.](#)*

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Text

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

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## Comment

Have you ever been in a situation where someone is trying to make you change your mind? Or, have you ever been in a situation where you are trying to make someone change their mind?

Why do we wish people to change their minds? I'm sure there are many reasons.

Perhaps, we just want people to agree with us. Perhaps we want to be right. Perhaps we want to win, perhaps we enjoy power, perhaps we can't imagine being wrong; perhaps we're frightened of being wrong. When we are in this mode, we might make things up in order to make our 'side' seem right; we might make things up to mock and undermine the other side. We might cast our minds back to the run-up to the 2016 US election. When a recording of Donald Trump bragging about misogynistic violence was made public, he responded with "Crooked Hillary has a server in her basement".

In a way that seems beyond belief, Trump makes things up to prevent the possibility of repentance. And that was just the start.

Because that's what we are talking about: repentance. The capacity to change our minds. Repentance is the word at the heart of this gospel text. 'Bear fruits worthy of repentance' is what John the Baptist, with his strange clothes and his strange diet and his place of living in the middle of the wilderness is shouting about. Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Repentance, from the Greek *Metanoia*, means 'To change your mind'. He's saying 'When you change your mind, change the way you act.

Don't just change your mind'.

He is saying 'Changing your mind is a good thing. Do it. Find the things in your life about which you are wrong, and be glad to change your mind, and change your mind with gladness. Be an expert on this: changing your mind. Look for the situations where you can realise that you didn't know everything'.

What John the Baptist seemed to know is that human beings like to make it seem as though they know everything.

And because we don't know everything, but we want to seem like we do, we make stuff up; we don't want to be seen to be changing our minds because that would make it seem like we didn't know stuff.

John the Baptist had everybody coming to him. Poor people, powerful people, soldiers, people who were the victims of soldiers. People who were desperate, people who were cynical.

He could have been delighted by his appeal. He could have thought 'Look at all these people coming to hear me talk about repentance, changing their minds. Aren't I the popular cousin?'. But instead, he seemed to care more about what people did when they went home after their little pilgrimage. He seems to think 'I don't care that you're going to wear the *I visited John the Baptist in the Desert* badge, or that you posted about it on the internet. I want you to change your mind, and then, when you get home, change the way you act. Be different. Don't be hateful. Don't be racist. Don't hate women. Don't hate LGBT people. Stop what you are doing and do something better. That's what's worthy of repentance'.

The business of changing our minds is not without risk. These days, if someone changes their mind they may fear as much from their own group — the group they're leaving behind — as they did the 'other' group before. Belonging and belief are tied together in a way that begets much violence, and in a way that punishes change. Group dynamics are built around an agreed-upon set of standards, and woe betide you if you begin to question the standards and boundaries of your group. John the Baptist knows this. People come, and he rewards their pilgrimage with challenge: if you extort people for your own wealth, change your ways; if you use violence for your own benefit, cease. If you amass power by threatening people, or falsely accusing them, find your satisfaction in other places.

He is not interested in people's sense of belonging. He is interested in changed lives. Interestingly, he's not interested in heaven either. He's interested in the here and now. John is also not interested in satisfying the powerful by saying 'oh, the weak have to attend to their own problems, too'. Whether he thought that or not, I don't know. But what I do know is that he wasn't interested in a false-binary that said 'we all have to meet in the middle' — because that is always easier for the powerful than for the weak. He's uninterested in the middle. He's interested in the powerful attending to their power and changing their ways.

Advent is a time where those who follow it are not called out of the world for self-reflection, but into it, and into their own complicities in the wild world we inhabit. Change your ways, John the Baptist says: this is the way to prepare for the coming of the one we all anticipate.

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## Response

It's December. Some of us are already panicking a little about arrangements for Christmas.

What, on December 26th, will make you happy about how you've lived Christmas? What seeds of repentance can you sow now that, after the demands of the season, you'll be glad you put in.

John addresses those who have dominant power.

John addresses those who make money on the backs of those who don't

John addresses those who use violence — or the threat of it — for satisfaction.

John addresses those who defame another person's name for their own gain.

Where might these words land for you? What can be done in how money, power, threat and reputation can be reframed in the next weeks?

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## Prayer

John the Baptist

You probably weren't invited to many parties  
even though many people needed what you said.  
May we pay attention  
to what we know we need to do  
and do it.  
Because change is possible  
if we change.  
Because we need to see change in our world,  
Amen.