

Second Sunday of Advent – 2017

Truth and mercy are met together! What a wonderful image of the nature of God from today's passage from Psalm 85. Truth and mercy are met together!

Susan and I went to a book shop the other day and we asked the person at the counter for the self-help section. He said 'if I told you it would defeat the purpose!' It is course an easy section to find because it usually large and it is always full of brightly coloured books featuring good looking folks promising quick and easy fitness, health, wealth and happiness. Good luck!

During the week I attended a lecture at the Royal Military College on 'Faith in the military' given to the 2017 graduating class. The annual lecture is in memory of Francis Hulme-Moir one time Chaplain General, Bishop of Nelson in NZ and Dean of Sydney. We heard of the emphasis on Stoic philosophy in profession of arms *and* of its shortcomings. Stoicism like the modern self-help movement is flawed in that there is sense that we each have it within us to make good. The Christian tradition says this is patently untrue. Our tradition tells us that we are called to repentance but that we can only achieve this by the grace of God. Even a brief moment of personal introspection should make us aware what is lacking, an awareness of God's truth; but with that should also come an awareness of God's mercy.

Hearing, as we have done this morning, the beginning of Mark's gospel provides an opportunity for us to consider this gospel as we begin this year of Mark. This is widely believed to be the proto gospel, the first, it is brief, to the point and fast paced, it's a racy read! It has often been overlooked because it lacks some of the great parables of Luke, the teaching of Matthew and the theology of John but we need to be wary of discounting this gospel, because it is all there in Mark's account if we are prepared to sit with it and listen.

Aside from being the foundation of the gospel tradition it has proved to be an influential text for many. The great German theologian Jurgen Moltmann was imprisoned in a PoW camp in Scotland and in 1945 was shown pictures of the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps. He was horrified to think that he had been part of such an atrocity. An Army Chaplain offered him a copy of Mark's gospel and despite having no background in Christianity or theologian education he read it and later wrote:

I read Mark's gospel as a whole and came to the story of the passion; when I heard Jesus cry 'My God, my God why have you forsaken me?' I felt growing within me the conviction: this is someone who understands you completely, who is with you in your cry to God and had felt the same forsakenness as you are feeling now...I summoned up the courage to live again.

This really is a book about beginnings, about newness, about starting again. It is radical in its freshness and boldness in a way that we sometimes overlook because of its familiarity. 'The beginning of the good news of Jesus

Christ, the Son of God.' No beating around the bush, let's down to the nitty gritty! An old CO of mine always prefaced everything he said with the word 'listen.' Mark is doing much the same; sit up, listen, there is regime change, new management, and nothing will be the same again.

Metropolitan Anthony Bloom who headed the Russian Orthodox Church in Britain for many years was given a copy of Mark's gospel as a cynical, angry teenager. He has just sat through a sermon which had infuriated him. He decided to read the gospel to confirm for himself the emptiness and stupidity of Christianity. He later wrote:

The feeling I had occurs sometimes when you are walking along a street, and suddenly you turn around because you feel someone is looking at you. While I was reading before I reached the beginning of the third chapter, I suddenly became aware that on the other side of my desk there was a presence. I realised immediately: if Christ is standing here alive, that means he is the risen Christ.

Thinking about the words of Moltmann and Bloom I became aware that both these writers realised quite suddenly through their engagement with Mark's gospel that they were not alone. Two very different people. A humiliated PoW and an awkward teenager both found in the words of Mark the presence of God in their lives, for them both they were Advent experiences. Listen!

An Advent experience is one which contains two elements of the experience of God's presence, truth and mercy. Both of our writers were brought to repentance, change by these remarkable words. One of the enduring themes of the Bible is that of wilderness and those of you who have visited that part of the world will know the nature of that wilderness. But rather than seeing it as a purely a place of exile or punishment we must view it as a place of self-discovery. Time and time again in the scriptures the people of God are in the wilderness. The Exodus from Egypt, the return from the exile in today's reading, think of Elijah dashing off to the desert and the new Elijah, John the Baptist out in the scrub. And of course ultimately Jesus his wilderness experience before his public ministry. All these wilderness experiences are about self-discovery, renewal and for some repentance.

In Advent we called to self-discovery, yes, but we are we called to discover ourselves as *loved* by God; Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Both Bloom and Moltmann in their introspection discovered themselves as being loved by God and this is the key to this Advent season. I know that I am swimming against the tide, the rip out there is very strong and it is pulling me, us, towards Christmass with very little thought other than what to buy or what to eat. For too many of us there is no time for introspection; we don't know ourselves and as a consequence *we don't know God*. The Advent season calls us to consider God's truth *and* mercy in our lives, and Mark's gospel 'The beginning of the good news' is the place where we can read all it about, and experience it. I encourage you to find yourself in the pages of this gospel and in doing so find the God for whom we wait. Amen.