

Advent II Year A Isaiah 11:1-10, Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

On this second Sunday of Advent we meet the strange figure of John the Baptist—clothed in his camel hair coat wandering the wilderness eating locusts and wild honey and calling upon everyone he met to confess their sins, baptizing the repentant in the river Jordan, denouncing the religious leaders as a brood of vipers, and warning all that would listen that one greater than he would come who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire and separate the wheat from the chaff.

Today's Gospel reminds us what it means to prepare for the coming the Lord—and it has little to do with shopping malls, singing carols, decorating trees, entertaining guests or going to parties. The life and witness of John the Baptist invite us to reflect on what it really means to be a Christian, on what it means to be a follower, a disciple of Jesus Christ.

John reminds us that to follow Jesus Christ very often requires us to stand against or outside the dominant culture. The disciple of Jesus Christ is counter-cultural and John the Baptist is a clear and convincing model of the counter-cultural person. John wore strange clothes; he ate strange food; and he wandered about the countryside calling upon anyone he met to repent and to return to the Lord. John hardly conformed to the norms of acceptable social behaviour. But in doing all this, in standing outside cultural norms and expectations, John was being faithful to the calling that was his since his birth. By reflecting on John's life, we learn a great deal about how following Jesus involves our being counter-cultural in today's society.

There are many areas in contemporary living in which you and I, as disciples of Jesus Christ, are called upon to be counter-cultural. Let me suggest for our reflection today three: (1) identity, (2) values, (3) and life-style.

John the Baptist preached his message of repentance in a society and a culture marked by division and disunity; a society and culture in which persons were identified and labelled, isolated and excluded because of their race, their ethnicity, their gender, their social status. John reminded anyone who would listen that we have only one identity—we are all children of God, but children who have separated ourselves from a loving parent through our own pride and wilfulness. John preached that we are all one before God and that we all need to take a serious look at our lives and how we have distanced ourselves from God. He called everyone to repentance—to an acknowledgement of our shortcomings and to an ownership of our mistakes so that we could be reconciled with God and with one another. John's message reminds us that each of us is a person loved by God and gifted with human life; a person of infinite dignity and worth, not because of what we do, but because of who we are; a person given a share in God's own divine life and called to service and discipleship, a person with strengths and weaknesses, invited daily to conversion and holiness. Such an understanding of human identity breaks down barriers and erodes prejudices of class, race, and gender. But as we know too well, ours is a culture, ours is society, in which barriers and divisions, even within the church, the community of disciples, persists. John calls us back to our true identity, a counter cultural identity that is radical in its inclusiveness, an identity that has little use for the labels our culture applies to sort and classify different people and groups [labels applied very often to disempower and isolate some so as to enhance the power and privilege of others]; John reminds us that we are called to an identity that proclaims the dignity, worth and value of all persons.

John the Baptist was very clear about who he was and who he was not. He was not the Messiah. How many of us have inflated notions of our own rightness, our own correctness, our own importance? How many of us think that others should be just like us? John knew who his was not—he was not the Messiah but rather one who proclaimed the coming of one greater than himself. His identity was not one based on a puffed up notion of his own greatness and worth—rather he proclaimed someone who was to come after him. John knew who he was: he was a voice crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord;" he was the herald of the Messiah and the servant of the Lord. To be a herald, to be a servant is counter cultural—especially in a culture such as ours based upon self-promotion; in a society in which so much of what we do involves building up ourselves at the expense of others. To be a servant is to be counter cultural—especially in a culture such as ours that is so often based on getting ahead, on being number one, on accumulating power and influence and status for ourselves. John the Baptist challenges us to reflect upon who we are and who God calls us to be. He reminds us that to respond to God's call certainly places us outside the norms of our culture; and that to be faithful to our call to discipleship requires us to live lives that many in our culture and society may find strange and threatening—just as many found John strange and threatening.

Values influence our choices and decisions. John the Baptist was clear about his values. John proclaimed the centrality of God and the need for repentance: these are counter cultural concepts. When was the last time in our media or among our political and business leaders that you heard someone genuinely and sincerely admit that they were wrong, admit that they had made a mistake and commit themselves to making amends? The more usual response in our society is denial; when that fails an aggressive counter attack on the integrity of one's accusers often ensues; and than costly legal actions [witness the behaviour of the mayor of Toronto and

everyone involved in the Senate scandal]. But the reality is that we all mistakes, we all fall short from time to time, we all sometimes choose the wrong path. When we do so, John reminds us that we must come back to our values, we must come back to that which defines our sense of right and wrong, and admit our mistakes, seek forgiveness, and move forward guided by that which we know to be true and just. John's values are values rooted in a challenge to personal reform and to a change in heart—his are the values of conversion and faithfulness, values that lie at the heart of the discipleship to which we are all called but values which are difficult to live by in our dominant culture. Of course the same was true in John's day and he paid a price, the ultimate price, for standing by his values and had his head served up on a platter for speaking the truth.

Life-style implies the pattern of how we go about living life day by day. John the Baptist's lifestyle was simple, even stark. We too are called to be counter-cultural in terms of our life-style. Do we live simply and without pretense, using responsibly our resources for the welfare of our families and the support of those who are truly poor and in need? Do we value the persons in our lives above material things, so that we spend more time with them than with earning more money? Like John the Baptist, each of us must fashion a lifestyle that will make the Gospel easier to preach, to see, to influence.

Ultimately, we must be counter-cultural in terms of being genuinely Christian, in all of life, not just on Sunday mornings. We are called and challenged to declare by the life-style we fashion, by the values we formulate, by the self-identity we reflect, the centrality of Jesus in our daily lives. We must be counter-cultural by proclaiming more through action than by words: "Jesus is

Lord." That is what John the Baptist did. That is what we must try to do and to be during this Advent season as we prepare the way for the coming of the Lord.