

“Faith: use it or lose it”?

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Advent 3 B – The Sunday of the Baptist – Ps 126, Jn 1.6-8, 19-28

We might wonder why each Advent, year in, year out, we Christians are tasked with getting ready again for the coming of Jesus. We did it last year and the year before – over and over. But don't we already have our faith? Shouldn't we be telling this to people of no faith? Yes indeed. But that doesn't let us off the hook.

The reason we have this annual call to readiness, to wakefulness, is that any person of faith can easily lose the plot, or just go to sleep. Autopilot-faith switches on and we switch off. We stop being open to the on-going transformation that's part of a living, growing faith. We regress. Our world shrinks inexorably to a self-interested bubble. And not just individuals. Entire nations can forget the heart of their faith and its values. Justice, mercy and faithfulness go out the window, to be replaced by judgment and a dehumanising fearful mistrust of *the other*. So this year, we see helpless, abused communities being demonised and attacked; here in Australia too.

All this tells us that the Advent call is an essential reminder; that prevention is much better than a cure. Today's Psalm shows how Advent works. It starts as a joyful song of people rescued from exile. But it's a memory, and memories only carry our faith so far. The second half of the Psalm is a prayer that God will keep at it. Please bring the usual rain clouds to our drought-stricken lives, so we, who are planting seeds in hope now, will shout with joy at the harvest. Will God *do it again*? They sound confident. Remembering regularly where our hope is founded is a healthy thing.

We read in today's Gospel that John the Baptist was doing something similar to the psalmist; reminding a faith community to own their faith. Today's Gospel tells that John was baptising in someone else's country *on the other side of the Jordan*. This is the river the people crossed when, finally, they arrived home from exile in Babylon; it's the joyful escape that the psalmist celebrates. Today we see John the Baptist call them back over that river, back out of their land again. Because that's where spiritually lost people can be physically reminded: *this* was where God led the exiles, their lost ancestors, home. You don't forget muscle memory in a hurry.

Like the Psalm does, the Gospel reminds us that this gift of being restored is one that's offered to those who *already are* God's people. We may feel lost; we may wonder if God's still with us. But the exiles *were* called home. The Psalm asks can that grace still be available to their descendants. The Gospel says that John the Baptist has been sent to the river to answer *yes!* Yes to you and me as well.

John calls people caught in a spiritual drought to come down to the life-giving waters of the river; to come and cross it again. He calls them to the other side of the river. He stands physically where these people have got to spiritually. He calls them across to show with their bodies what has happened in their lives. He calls them there, and charges them to be again the people they're intended to be; a light to the nations; to be again a people who are ready to greet the one who is to come.

When John the Baptist called the people of Judea and Jerusalem to baptism, he was saying they needed complete renewal. His calling was to see that each person he led through the river and back into the Land emerged from that water into a new life. John's baptism was one of the most powerful symbolic actions I can think of in any religion. Accepting his baptism meant owning yourself to be someone with

your back to God; lost and broken; someone who needed to be made completely new. And knowing all that, you had to trust enough that with John's help, you could turn back wholeheartedly to God.

It's a tremendous gift that John has given to the church. Even though we may be facing into impenetrable shadow; even though we may be at absolute rock bottom; even though we may believe ourselves totally disconnected from God, John's baptism teaches us that our faith is not defined by our feelings. Our faith is turning back from death to life. And it's not just a one-off event; it involves on-going growth and transformation. Faith is a living, growing thing, like our bodies are.

Different churches have their own ways of helping people's faith to be renewed like today's Scriptures have shown us happening. These rituals help to nurture in us the on-going transformation that's part of a living, growing faith. Many churches observe the season of Advent with its focus on waking up and getting ready. The Methodist tradition has an annual covenanting service where people re-commit themselves as followers of Jesus. At the Easter Vigil, Anglicans, Lutherans and Catholics renew our baptismal promises.

Can you remember any time in your faith life when you have made such a re-commitment? Has anybody called you from a state of spiritual drought – called you down to the river? Did they turn *you* around, did it turn *your* life around? It *is* a life-and-death matter. Around the world today, we are seeing people of faith at war with each other – people whose faiths call us to be peaceful, just and merciful. I pray that we all open ourselves to the regular renewal of these faith values. Amen