

The Call to a New Life

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Advent 3 b – The Sunday of the Baptist – Ps 126, Jn 16-8, 19-28

When the Lord turned again the fortunes of Zion: then were we like those restored to life. Today's Psalm began as the song of returned exiles. We joined their joyful song; celebrated their home-coming from a far-away country. They sang how proud they were that other nations saw how much God cared for them. But the Psalm suddenly became more worrying; the people are in the Promised Land, yet they ask God to restore them again. *Turn again our fortunes, O Lord: as the streams return to the dry south.* They pray for spiritual water to bless their drought-stricken lives,

What's gone wrong? The joyful song celebrating freedom suddenly became a sad prayer to be restored from exile again; this time, from a different type of exile. This time, they're caught in a spiritual drought. Is God still with them?

Streams of living water are a frequent theme in scripture. So it's no accident that the last prophet sent to Israel in answer to this prayer is John the Baptist. God called John to tackle the people's spiritual exile – their spiritual dryness – and John chose to use water very imaginatively to get the job done; very particular water. We read in today's gospel that *John was baptising in Bethany on the other side of the Jordan*. It's a pointed reminder that this is the river the people of the Exodus crossed when they followed Joshua into the land of promise. This is the river the people crossed a second time when they finally returned from exile in Babylon.

John has gone down to *that* river – to the other side of *that* river – because if you're coming back from being an exile – a slave – you have to cross *that* river. John went to the other

side of that river and called people there with him to learn how God provides for returning exiles – for the lost. They had to leave the land yet again, and ask for the grace to return as people who are given a fresh start in life. John calls people caught in spiritual drought to come down to the other side of *that* river. He placed himself physically right where the people were spiritually. He called them to *that* place, to feel with their senses what had happened deep in their souls.

They were a people called to be a light to the nations. They were meant to be a people ready to greet the coming one. John came to turn them back to the light; to prepare them for the coming of Jesus. When John called the people of Judea and Jerusalem to baptism, it was complete renewal he was calling them to. The Psalmist asked for God to send the stream. John used it to drown the exile out of them; that's the symbol he gave us in a baptism of repentance. When a person crossed the river with him, back into the Land, the one who arose from *that* river was a new person.

Lots of symbols. There's the symbol of leaving their own land – their birthright – and there's the symbol of the dead people of God becoming the living people of God again. And that's on top of the two older memories of the Exodus and the Exile. John's baptism was an enormously powerful symbolic action. Accepting his baptism meant owning ourselves to be enslaved to someone else – to something else – an exile, someone who has turned our back on God; somebody who needs to be made completely new, and acknowledging all that, turning back to God.

It's a tremendous gift that John has given to the church. Even though you or I may be facing into deep shadow; even though we may be at absolute rock bottom; even though we may feel totally disconnected from God, John's baptism shines a light in the darkness, and guides God's people back from the deepest place on the face of the Earth to life again. John's baptism is at once a call from God, and a gift from God which enables

us to respond to that call; to accept it. The miracle is God's.

Our collect prayer reminds us that we are called to share in this ministry with John. *Eternal God, you sent John the Baptist to prepare the way for the coming of your Son: grant us wisdom to see your purpose, and openness to hear your will, that we too may prepare the way for Christ.* It's an awesome responsibility, and my prayer is that we, as a community, can engage with this calling like John did – with imagination, with forthrightness and clarity, for there are many in and out of the Church who sense a spiritual exile, but are yet to hear the call to new life. Amen.