

SERMON FOR 3rd SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Fr Jordan Greatbatch

On the day that the famous physicist Albert Einstein died, Time photographer Ralph Morse eschewed the crowds of reporters and other photojournalists gathered at Princeton Hospital, and instead found his way to Einstein's office at the Institute of Advanced Studies.

He snapped a single picture of the legacy of the world's greatest mind. What that picture showed is chaos. Not an inch of Einstein's desk is free of paper. Books, manuscripts, magazines, and envelopes are everywhere (along with what looks like a cookie jar). The same goes for the shelves. One shelf holds neatly arrayed journals, but elsewhere are piles and piles of papers.

It's a mess, and he liked it that way. When asked about his messy desk, Einstein remarked "If a cluttered desk is a sign of a cluttered mind, then what are we to think of an empty desk?" It is these sorts of contrasts which attract our attention. The world's greatest mind, and what some might call a disorganized office.

In Today's Gospel we encounter such a contrast. The man known as John the Baptist. John challenged people to think more than skin deep. He challenged even the religious leaders who saw themselves as above reproach. It is these sorts of prophets that throughout the millennia have called God's people to a deep reflection, the contrast, however is that they have usually been people who don't fit society's norms, they

are people of deep wisdom but also, we might say, messy desks.

John's message is plain, it is to repent. Unfortunately, as Fr Robert hinted at last Sunday, it is fair to say the word repent is out of fashion. Perhaps from years of firestorm preaches using the word inappropriately, with banging of pulpits included. But repentance is in fact a more nuanced and meaningful word than its mainstream definition. In Biblical Hebrew, the idea of repentance is represented by two verbs: שׁוּב shuv (to return) and נָחַם nacham (to feel sorrow). Repentance simply means to return in sorrow to that which brings life. What John wanted was for people to return from the things which spoilt their life and face God once again. The sign of that repentance was twofold. Baptism was an outward sign, and so was amendment of life. Those two things baptism and amendment of life went together.

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When John was in prison, we are told he began to doubt his own mission. He sent word to Jesus to ask if he was really the Messiah. Jesus' answer was simple, look around and see what is happening. The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, and so on. In other words, there are signs of the realm of God all around you. Look for those signs.

This was a great contrast to John's mission. He was expecting people to change their behavior. Jesus, however, was expecting people to see God in their midst. And when they

saw God then they would be changed. This is a huge contrast between these two. For we often have this idea of Jesus being overly pious all the time, but rather the contrary is true. He spent time with the outsiders and the troubled as well as those in power and privilege.

For John was of the old order. Jesus was bringing in something new.

John sang a funeral hymn, Jesus an alleluia.

John refused to eat bread, only locusts and wild honey, while Jesus broke his bread to share.

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John refused to drink wine, but Jesus changed all the water in the kitchen into wine.

John dressed in camel skin, Jesus in a custom-tailored robe, woven in one piece without a seam.

John warned the people of the wrath to come, Jesus invited the people to align themselves with the new Kingdom.

The huge contrast between these two men more clearly shows the great change Jesus was bringing. He looked forward with hope to a new life where the wrongs of the world would be put right. His method of bringing about that change was different from the past, it was about pointing to the signs of God among us.

And so, we need to take time to look for those signs. Sometimes it's in the contrasts that we see the presence of God. Sometimes the prophets are the ones we least expect,

or are the ones that society overlooks. As the old saying goes, God works in mysterious ways.

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As we all move towards another celebration of Christ's coming among us, we are encouraged to only see the signs but to be signs of the realm of God in our midst. We are the ones who are to provide the contrasts in life. Our lives will be seen as different in that we live in the realm of God. It is not all about the clothes we wear or the titles in front of our name, it is rather our faithfulness to God that matters. Our lives will show that we place our trust in God. How we behave to our fellow human beings will be our chance to show signs of God's presence among us. This presence of God we experience here in bread and wine, a presence of God experienced in our dealings one with another, a presence of God seen in the contrasts of our world. And like John, we seek to prepare for the final coming of our Lord when the contrasts will disappear and we will all be one in God.