

3rd Sunday Advent Homily



I sometimes have a dream that Tuchel, Klopp, Conte or Pep Guardiola, (one of the great football managers), suddenly decide that their life was not enough of a challenge, so he announces that he is resigning immediately and for very little money has taken up the post of managing Blackpool. In my dream this shoots us to the top of the Championship and next season into the Premiership and the season after that we are in the Champions League final playing Bayern Munich, though somehow that game seems to be a home one at Bloomfield Road (which I am sure you all know is Blackpool's home ground.)

There are of course certain things that make this dream unlikely. But one question that never comes up in my dream is whether even a Tuchel or a Klopp could manage it with the players we now have. In my dream he remains loyal to the current player and still succeeds.

But as we know, you need the players as well as the coach.

The great thing about God is that he has complete faith in his players, which is each and every one of us. He is well aware that we aren't on our best form every day, and that sometimes a promising career gets completely derailed. And yet even then he has total faith that we can turn it around.

This is what John the Baptist is doing in the first part of our gospel. People come to him because they know something is wrong but they just do not know what to do. Stretching my footballing image further than it should ever go, the team are trying their best but something is just not working. (Often a problem with Blackpool.)

So the big question, and one which occurs in most of our lives at certain points is "What must I do?"

The people ask, the tax-collectors ask, the soldiers, 'How do we turn our lives around?' And John the Baptist has the very answer. 'You know, he is saying, how you are meant to live.' It is almost as if they do not really need him to say it, which is often true for ourselves too. We can see what we need to do, but we just keep putting it off for all kinds of reason. John the Baptist is really the voice of conscience here. 'Share with those who need help, clothes, food, treat people justly. Don't extort money from the poor. If you are in a position of power, don't abuse the power you have.'

In a sense it is, stick by your job description. But it is more than that in our world, as a job, a manager, might say to us, 'We need you to extort some more money or, don't pay them yet (even though you know not paying on time will hurt them badly.) Often the difficulty for us is that 'sharp practice' comes to be seen as good business. John the Baptist is calling this out and saying,

don't just do what others do, or what has come to be seen as 'OK,' but listen to your conscience, however difficult that might be. And it certainly can be. In the end you can be demoted, lose your job, for sticking by your conscience.

But to be a Christian is not just to live like this. Many people as we know so well can be and are good people. They live by their consciences, they lead good lives.

But for Luke there is something more here. Yes, to start you have to have a good life, as best you can, at least have the intention to lead it, hope to.

But there is more, and this is where the inspirational manager comes in.

In our story so far most people have never heard of Jesus. Now John says to them, and most of them will not understand, 'You have come out into the desert to have your signs forgiven. That I am happy and capable of doing. But what I cannot do is take you to the next level. But there is one coming who is about to do that.'

So far John has got people back on track. But what is Jesus going to do? He is going to baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. It is not just by chance that 'Spirit' and 'inspiration' are linked. From the Old Testament's beginning right through the scriptures to the end of John's gospel (the evangelist not our John here of course) when God comes to create, God breathes life into his creation. That spirit, that breath, is what energises, gives life, to use an old expression of the Holy Spirit, vivifies creation.

We have had that life poured into us at baptism. As for the fire, we will see it appear over the apostles and Mary at Pentecost, the creation of the new Church.

Fire is dramatic, it cleanses, it gives warmth, it spreads rapidly in the right conditions. Fire is something that embodies action and movement.

So is Spirit, as we said, it gives life, brings to life, excites.

At the beginning of his gospel, in these early chapters, Luke is telling us what is going to happen. It is just starting here. In the next chapter Jesus is going to feel the power of the Spirit and he is going to stand up and dare to speak to his elders in the synagogue. He is about to embark on his mission.

What can we learn from our gospel today? Firstly that we need to be the best we can be, and involved in that is repentance and being open and ready to listen to and act by our consciences, whatever that takes.

Secondly, if the idea of Church is going to work, it has to be made up of people who feel inspired, and if you like, 'fired up,' courageous. Church cannot be a passive thing.

We have to be ready. But then we have to accept that we have an inspirational coach whose name is Jesus Christ. He needs us to be fired up for the game, ready to be courageous players.