

In our Gospel today we've been invited to meet one of the great characters of Holy Scripture: John the Baptist. He is not the kind of guy you'd immediately warm to. Dressed in camel-skin and shouting out about the need to repent he is, in fact, quite confronting. We meet him today, in the protesters who feel the hurt of asylum seekers shut up in detention camps; we meet him in the people who protest against child abuse, domestic violence, bank charges, partisan politics, and so on.

While we recognise that these things need to be addressed, - that change is needed, we often wish they'd go about their protests more quietly, and don't disturb the public order with their sit-ins; with their marches through the streets that disrupt the traffic, with their catchcries that deafen one as they are shouted through megaphones.

John the Baptist is alive and well today, and we need to listen to him in what he is saying today, just as the run-of-the-mill people in Judea did 2000 years ago. John's message was simple: "The Saviour, the One we've been longing for is at hand. Be ready to change your ways, for he will separate the chaff from the wheat!"

What John is asking for is something deeper than putting up the Christmas decorations, putting on a CD with Christmas Carols, or pounding the shops for Christmas presents that never quite satisfy.

In calling for roads to be made straight, mountains to be laid low, and valleys filled in, John is calling for site-preparation; the preparation that's needed before a building is started.

We see examples of that around us constantly. Just go to the corner of Toorak Rd and Chapel St., and see the enormously big hole that's been dug, before the first lot of concrete was poured. Without that preparation, a building will lean, sink or even collapse. Spiritual site-preparation is what John the Baptist is calling us to do.

Like buildings, Christmas time evokes strong hopes and dreams in our lives: - thoughts of family, friends and fellowship. We look to a world of peace and harmony where people care about each other or at least respect

each other, and live in their dignity as people of God. We dream of building great spiritual structures in our life: a strong marriage, trusted friendships, a family in harmony, a powerful spirituality, and the experience of Christ's grace and purpose in our life.

Such constructions are possible, with God's grace. Are we willing to do the site-preparation? Are we willing to get rid of the potholes and bumps in our life? What are we willing to give up in order to prepare for solid spiritual construction in our life?

It would be wonderful if the joy and peace of Christmas came with just pulling a few Chinese crackers apart and putting on a party hat, but that's not the case. The deeper Christmas, - which is a rebirth of fidelity to our Lord and Saviour, - a deeper appreciation of our Christian dignity and mission, - a renewed welcoming of Christ and his Gospel into our life - requires preparation.

Renewal in our life, or in the Church, for that matter, requires repentance. Renewal and repentance always go together, - so, in the middle of this crowded season, let us still make room for John the Baptist and his message of repentance, for that is how he keeps us real.

He reminds us that we should be getting ready not just for another holiday season, but to renew our lives in the power of Christ, by getting rid of the obstacles that block our full experience of God's grace and power in our lives.

He reminds us that we can change. He calls again in this crowded Christmas season to take away one or two stones or boulders that block the full flow of grace into our life.

He prepares us not for temporary seasonal cheer but for deep joy in the Lord that comes from experiencing release from sin and new life in Christ.

John the Baptist's message of repentance carries the promise of new life, a new future in Christ that is now open to each one of us.

With John the Baptist, Christmas will be not just a holiday season but a healing season as well.