**Lord Jesus, Come Soon!**

One of the customs which I love here at the monastery, is that at Compline each night, on the anniversary of Brother’s death, we read his obituary. Now not to boast, but I will take the credit, or perhaps the blame, for reviving this custom, and for writing some of the obituaries. Now after listening to them, I am aware that some of them were badly written and others, eye rollingly embarrassing and have caused more than a few sniggers. Recently, I decided it was time to fill in the gaps, and to rewrite the really dreadful ones.

One of the obituaries has always caused us to roll our eyes. In Father Conran’s we would read *that his health precluded him from living in community for long periods of time*, and so off he went to Scotland to run a parish, and to live with his sister. We rolled our eyes, not because we couldn’t imagine the scenario, but because everyone has not wished that our health precluded us from living in community. Over the years, Father Conran became a caricature upon whose delicate constitution we would project our own feelings, and frustrations with life in community.

But I’ve discovered something. We had Father Conran all wrong. I’ll let him speak for himself:

*Somewhere in France*

*11 October 1915*

*We have had our confirmations. At first the men didn’t understand; … they…seemed to think of it as ‘being done,’ much as if they were to be inoculated…. But the great difficulty was when and where to see them to give them any sort of preparation…Then there were [other] difficulties; for instance, how about the commandment “Thou shalt do no murder,” when they were trying to kill Germans every day.*

*At last the day of confirmation came. …at 2 PM 126 of those I had prepared were there…but no Bishop, then a wire to say ‘motor broken down’ but he was coming on. We spent the time going over the instructions…but the men were getting uneasy; they had to be back in the trenches. I felt they must go, and had just said so, when the Bishop came. No time for address or hymns… they knelt down to be confirmed, and after the Blessing marched straight away, I fear some to death, and some to be wounded; but [they]…had the gift of the Holy Ghost to strengthen them through what was to come the following day; a day I shall never forget as long as I live….[[1]](#footnote-1)*

It wasn’t Father Conran’s delicate constitution that precluded him from living in community. What precluded him from living in community is what we now call Post Traumatic Stress, and what he would have called Shell Shock. Now when I think of him, I think not of a delicate constitution, but of the killing fields of the First World War; of flash backs; mood swings; nightmares; cold sweats; depression; perhaps uncontrollable rage and suicide attempts. *A day I shall never forget as long as I live.* It is safe to say that Father Conran never did forget that day. That day was etched in his memory for the rest of his life. That’s why Father Conran’s health precluded him from living in community. It wasn’t his delicate constitution, but because he saw what no one should see, never mind live though.

Knowing the truth about Father Conran has challenged me, and in challenging me, I have been changed. I have changed the way I think about him. No longer is he an object of pity or ridicule, but of awe and incredulity. I have changed the way I now listen to his obituary, and indeed all the obituaries. I have changed the way I relate not just to his past, but to the community’s past, and even to my own past. Knowing the truth about Father Conran has changed me. But isn’t that what truth does? Truth changes us if we let it.

You could say, that today is a feast of truth; that John the Baptist is a saint of truth; that Advent is a time of truth. If we let it, truth will not only challenge us it change us.

John the Baptist stands in a long line of prophets. The role of the prophet in scripture is not to predict the future, but to speak the truth, God’s truth, to a disbelieving, distracted, disheartened people. At times the prophet is sent to speak this word of truth, God’s truth, to a specific person, the king, the ruler, and truth is spoken to power. At times the prophet is sent to speak this word of truth, God’s truth, to a people, the nation, and that truth comes as a word of warning, a word of challenge, a word of hope. Whenever, and however, it comes, truth, God’s truth, has the power to change people. And those to whom the word of truth, God’s truth, is spoken, have a choice: we can choose to hear the word of truth, or they can choose to ignore it. We can choose to hear or ignore, not because the truth hurts, but because the truth challenges, and changes us. If we choose to hear the word of truth, we will be changed, just as I was changed when I heard the word of truth about Father Conran.

We live in the midst of a disbelieving, distracted, disheartened world. How could we not? Who has not been disheartened, distracted, disbelieving this week, this month, this year? The news we hear day by day, week in, week out, is anything but encouraging.

Today we hear John the Baptist speak a word of truth to a brutally oppressed people, living in an occupied land:

*Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.5 Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; 6and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.*[[2]](#footnote-2)

Who would blame John’s audience for not believing? How could this possibly be true? How in the midst of a military occupation are they expected to see the salvation of God? These are the words of a madman, not a prophet. Who would blame us for not believing? How in the midst of COVID, the very real and justified anger behind Black Lives Matter, the climate crisis, not to mention the daily ups and downs of our own lives, are we expected to see the salvation of God. These are the words of a madman, not a prophet.

But they aren’t the words of a madman. This is the promise of God…*all flesh shall see the salvation of God.*

Advent is the darkest time of the year, literally, and it would seem, this year at well, metaphorically. We are those people of whom Isaiah spoke who sat in darkness, desperate to see the light.

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness — on them light has shined.[[3]](#footnote-3)*

We are those people who pray the words of Revelation: *Maranatha! Lord Jesus, come soon![[4]](#footnote-4)* aching for the light to return, not just to our lives, but to our world.

It is to us, no less than the crowds along the Jordan River, that John comes speaking the word of truth, God’s truth: *and all flesh shall see the salvation of God*. We are desperate to see that salvation here, now, today. We are desperate to see God’s salvation in our own lives. We are desperate, and God knows it. And the promise of God is that we will. We can. We do. Even today, we can see the salvation of God.

But to see it, we need to be prepared to change, because the truth will change us. I found the truth about Father Conran, and not only was the way I looked at him changed, I was changed. We know the Word of Truth in Jesus, and if we let him, he will change us.

Advent is a time when we face the darkness, not only of our own lives, but of the world. We know the stark, dark reality of our need to see the salvation of God. The promise of Christmas is not just the promise of a baby but promise that God has heard our cry. *Maranatha! Lord Jesus, come soon!* we cry for ourselves, for our world. The promise of God is that our cry has been heard. To our cry *Lord Jesus, come soon!* God answers *Vero Cras*: truly I will come.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The word of truth spoken by John is not just some future prediction, but a present reality. Yes, God will come, but more to the point, God has come, and God is coming. That is God’s truth.

Sometimes God’s truth is spoken to power, and if they listen, they tremble.

Sometimes God’s truth is spoken to a disbelieving, distracted, disheartened world. And if we listen, our eyes will be opened, our ears unstopped, and our lives changed.

It’s curious. Father Conran opened my eyes. He unstopped my ears. He changed my life. And today I can see the salvation of God just a tiny bit clearer, even in the darkness.

**Date:** 12 December 2021

**Lectionary Year and Proper:** Advent II, Year C

**Solemnity or Major Feast Day:** Advent II

**Occasion:** Project 1720

**Place:** Monastery of Saint Mary and Saint John

**Primary text(s) to link:** Luke 3: 1 -6

**Title:** Lord Jesus, Come Soon

**Author:** James Koester SSJE

1. Cowley Evangelist, November 1915, page 248-249 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Luke 1: 4c-6 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Isaiah 9: 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Revelation 22: 20b [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Great O Antiphons of Advent, according to the Sarum Usage and as sung at the Monastery, form a Latin acrostic spelling out ‘Vero Cras’ or ‘Truly I will come.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-5)