

Advent 2A

At this time of year, we all enjoy a good moan about the consumerization of Christmas. One of the greatest and most meaningful Christian feasts, we observe, is now simply a time for feelgood festivity – and, of course, for cashing in on it. Christmas these days is a celebration of the human, not the divine. And that, we agree, is sad.

But Christmas isn't the only thing that's been consumerized. Today, as he always does on the second Sunday of Advent, John the Baptist makes his appearance. And it is quite the appearance. According to St Matthew, "John wore a garment made of camel hair ... his food was locusts and wild honey."

You've got to admire someone like John. He was clearly held in great admiration by the people of his time. The way he himself aloof and made absolutely no concessions to the world, the way he directed his whole being towards the divine, not the human – it commanded respect. Even his enemies, like King Herod, on some level respected him.

John is the opposite of the modern consumer. Today's ideal consumer is focused on his own material needs and desires – and, let's say, those of his family. Or her family. The ideal consumer is also impressionable, and therefore vulnerable to the subconscious influence of advertising. It's easy to manipulate the modern consumer.

Probably not so easy to manipulate a man whose idea of fashion is camel-hair and whose idea of nice grub is honey and insects. John, we could say, is the anti-consumer. His focus is marginalizing his own needs and desires as much as possible, so as to make maximum space in his heart for God.

Am I saying we should all go and replace our wardrobes with hair shirts and eat insects for Christmas dinner? No. After all, Jesus didn't do that, and John wasn't worthy to carry his sandals. Instead, I want put another form of consumerism under the microscope. I'm talking about the consumerization of religion.

What was it that eventually did for John the Baptist? Was it his extreme diet or fashion sense? No, it was a refusal to consumerize religion. King Herod demanded that John should adapt his religion in order to accommodate the King's desires. John said "No. It is against the law for you to marry your brother's wife." That, in the end, was what cost him his head.

It's my belief that we – the Church, the followers of Jesus, Christians – have to a degree been affected by the spirit of consumerism. We've been so conditioned by our culture into placing our needs and our desires and our opinions at the centre of everything that it has affected our religious lives as well. The Church's faith is given whole, and it is supposed to be received whole. And yet, very often, we don't receive it whole. We receive it selectively. We take the bits that "work for us" and ignore or reject the bits that don't. In this way, our religion becomes self-centred and self-serving. We become consumers of religion, not really disciples.

And that's not the only problem. Inevitably, "what works for me" is shaped by the values of the broader culture, just like the desires of consumers are shaped by the advertising industry. The consumerization of religion, therefore, goes hand in hand with the secularization of religion. We select the bits of our faith that we like based on values we have absorbed from the dominant secular culture. The endpoint of that process looks something like the today's Episcopalian Church – a structure of beliefs and values dictated largely by the secular culture, over which is thrown a nice, soft cover of religion. That process is playing out as we speak in the Catholic Church, too: in China, in Germany, in Ireland and elsewhere – often, quite sadly, under the banner of synodality.

It ought to be resisted. We're right to be concerned about the consumerization of Christmas. We would be right to be equally concerned about the consumerization of our faith. That's maybe harder to spot – you don't see it in shop windows or on your TV screen – but it's just as dangerous. Even more so, in fact. John the Baptist gave Herod a clear warning whether he wanted one or not. If John had the chance to warn us about anything today, perhaps that would be it.