

3rd Sunday of Advent (A)
Isaiah 35:1-6.10 / Matthew 11:2-11
15.12.2013

Our faith in Jesus

Dear brothers and sisters,

We continue our Advent journey with Saint John the Baptist as our guide. Did you notice in today's gospel that, even at the end of his life, John the Baptist's faith in Jesus was not all simple and without questions? John was disconcerted by what Jesus was doing.

Let us be clear: If anyone knew Jesus, it was John the Baptist. Recall the Visitation. Still in the womb of his mother Elizabeth, John leaped for joy recognizing the presence of Jesus in the womb of his mother Mary. During his life, John foretold the coming of Jesus the Messiah and prepared the hearts of his contemporaries to welcome Christ. He bore testimony to Jesus at the River Jordan, declaring that He was the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, before baptizing Him at Jesus' own request. So, yes, John knew Jesus.

However what John expected was a Messiah who would be the agent of God's wrath and retribution. In a previous chapter of Matthew's gospel, which was read for us last Sunday, John is recorded to have said to a number of Pharisees and Sadducees coming to him for baptism: **"Brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the retribution that is coming? But if you are repentant, produce the appropriate fruit, and do not presume to tell yourselves, "We have Abraham for our father... John continued: Even now the axe is being laid to the root of the trees, so that any tree failing to produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown on the fire... the Messiah has his winnowing-fan in his hand; he will clear his threshing-floor and gather his wheat into his barns; but the chaff he will burn in a fire that will never go out"**. These hard words are the proof that John was waiting for a powerful Messiah who would not be afraid to use violence to express his anger or as a way of retribution. But in fact when John looks at Jesus, he sees a compassionate Messiah who dispenses life-restoring miracles: **"the blind see again, and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised to life, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor..."** The point we have to retain is that, even at the end of a life consecrated to the Lord, John's faith in Jesus is disconcerted and needs to be purified.

It is the same for our own faith in Jesus. Our faith too always needs to be purified. The example of John the Baptist should give us courage when our own faith is put to the test. The point is that Jesus is much greater than our faith in Him. He is always beyond our understanding of who He is. We cannot encapsulate Christ. One day we understand one aspect of his message; the following day we are sensitive to another aspect of it. And still it is impossible for us to grasp the full picture of who Jesus is in one go.

We are waiting for Jesus who is coming among us. As we wait for him, inevitably we have a pre-conception of how he should come and manifest himself, but finally he comes in another way. We have to ask Him in prayer to prepare our hearts to recognize Him so as to be able to welcome His surprising grace.

What can help us to recognize Jesus? A clear answer is given to us in today's gospel: it is the Scriptures that can help us to recognize Jesus.

John sends his disciples to Jesus to ask Him if he is really the Messiah. Jesus answers: I am doing what the Scriptures had said the Messiah would do when he comes. Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah describing the Messianic era. This is exactly what Jesus is doing: "The blind see again, and the lamed walk, etc...". So Jesus is the Messiah foretold by the prophets. Jesus accomplishes the promises. Here also the lesson is clear: It is by reading the Scriptures that we are able to recognize the coming of the Messiah in our lives today. The regular practice of reading the Scriptures, meditating upon their message and praying these texts will help us to decipher the Lord's presence in our own lives and at work in all around us.

To know Jesus is never something achieved once and for all. Our faith in Jesus is a continual research. It is a never finished work. It is always unfinished business. It is for this reason that the Bible exhorts us again and again to seek the face of the Lord. Our growth in faith in Jesus is a process which is never achieved on this earth. Each day, the grace to discover an aspect of the message of Jesus is offered to us.

In what sense does our own faith in Jesus need to be purified?

Let us retain just one point this morning. There is a risk to focus only on one dimension of our spiritual life and to forget the full picture. True faith in Jesus requires of us a balance between all the dimensions of our spiritual experience. Let us take some examples:

Sometimes, we wait for Jesus in prayer, forgetting that he also comes to us through those with whom we live.

Sometimes we give ourselves completely for others in charitable works, forgetting that Jesus also wants to meet with us in the quiet of prayer.

Sometimes we hope to hear from Jesus through a spiritual guru when Jesus is ready to speak to us through the poor, the sick or the needy who cross our path.

Sometimes we wait for Jesus in familiar well-known ways, when he wants to lead us to meet Him on some unknown path in order to do something new within us.

To be attuned to the coming of Jesus in our lives is not always easy and immediate. We could ask ourselves: How long did it take for many of the inhabitants of South Africa to recognize Jesus' voice speaking through the prophetic intuitions of a Nelson Mandela?

How demanding it is for us to take on board the preferential option for the poor which in Christ's name Pope Francis underlines again and again as being necessary for the Church and the world?

Yes, our faith in Jesus is a process which has to be purified. Jesus really is the Lord of surprises who has never finished to lead us on a new path. May the Lord grant us the

grace to recognize the newness of life to which he calls us. May he give us the courage to follow him to the end, on his way and not just our own!