

2nd Sunday of Advent (A)
(Isaiah 11:1-10 / Matthew 3:1-12)
08.12.2019

On this 2nd Sunday of Advent the Church's liturgy invites us to listen to the teaching of John the Baptist. We are called to take his message to heart.

The Baptist's preaching is shown to be rooted in the prophecy of the Old Testament writer Isaiah. Indeed, John is depicted to be the one of whom Isaiah had spoken when he declared: *A voice cries in the wilderness. Prepare a way for the Lord. Make His paths straight.*

Note that it is *in the desert* that the voice resounds.

Mention of the desert evokes for us the barren areas of our hearts, our inner wastelands. It is in our desolation that the prophetic voice of John, whose message echoes that of the prophet Isaiah, is to be heard and heeded.

How important for us to hear the call to *make straight the Lord's paths in our hearts* and to hear this invitation not just in terms of a correctional word, but as an invitation to hope.

If we are called to undergo a radical conversion, it is implied that this is possible to us – not by the strength of our own arm, but by the power of God's grace at work within us. It is as if it is implied that if we are to experience the transformation to which God beckons us, then we must begin by hoping change can be wrought within us.

I would want to emphasise that it is particularly important for us to hear the whole of Isaiah's prophetic utterance which is addressed to us in today's first reading. This is necessary if we are to well and truly respond to the gospel's call to repentance.

If we don't hear the whole of Isaiah's text, so as to properly situate God's call, then we could foolishly imagine that our response to it is something that is within our own power alone. It isn't. Called to conversion, we must recognise that the change within us to which the Lord beckons us is a grace to be received.

When we state that *conversion is a grace* what we are saying is that it is God's free gift to us.

It seems to me that Isaiah's prophecy, with its mention of the an outpouring of the Spirit, points already in Old Testament times to the great gift of Pentecost – that turning event which changed people's hearts and minds and led to the birth of the Christian Church.

Mention of *the root of Jesse* from which life is seen to spring forth has us think of the cross upon which Jesus hung on Calvary's Hill.

The cross became *the tree of life* in *God's new creation* through Christ's paschal mystery. *The fresh shoot which has sprung forth, the scion which thrusts forth from the root of Jesse*, is none other than the person of Jesus-Christ who appears as the ultimate and finest fruit of Jesse's line.

John spoke of Jesus as *the One upon whom the Spirit of the Lord would come to rest*; the One who would be *endowed with the Spirit of wisdom and insight, the Spirit of counsel and power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord.*

The liturgical season of Advent is filled with *hope* which is a gift *that does not disappoint*, as Paul teaches when writing to the Romans. It is a time in which to prepare our hearts both for

Christ's coming and, I believe, we could say, it is also a time in which to implore a fresh outpouring of God's Holy Spirit of hope. The Spirit which reposed upon Jesus indicated Him to be the incarnation of God's love in our midst.

Fittingly, the Advent-Christmas season will end with the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord which will have us contemplate the Spirit of God resting upon Jesus. That same Spirit is meant to inhabit our hearts. As Paul reminded the Romans this Spirit is nothing other than *God's love poured into our hearts*.

If in our community we like to think and talk of these Advent days as the season of *holy hope*, we see it as a privileged time in which to implore God's gift of conversion.

One of the first actions of God's Holy Spirit poured into our hearts is conversion. The Spirit brings about change within us – transformation.

The change which is promised to us with the coming of the Spirit is not to be relegated to some far off future; it is something to be experienced in the immediate; it is a grace for the here and now of our lives.

This explains the real sense of urgency in John's appeal: *The kingdom of God is close at hand*. Note, is *close at hand* but not held in hand.

The kingdom is not something we have grasped as yet; it is not something we can claim to possess.

If the kingdom is not completely established in our hearts, it is, at least, breaking in upon us; it is coming about within us. Some signs of its coming will be evident. Its hallmarks are love, joy and peace, with justice. Hence there should be an ordering taking place in our lives; a re-ordering should be taking place within us as we open our hearts to the coming of the kingdom of God during these days of grace.

The core message of the prophets – the call addressed to God's people to *repent and change their ways* – stems back to ancient times. It was echoed throughout the centuries by one prophet after another. Even though it was given a fresh impulse with the appearance of John the Baptist it was not entirely new. This explains why the people gathered on Jordan's Banks could have easily dismissed what the preacher had to say, thinking to themselves *we've heard all this before*.

The same danger exists for us, does it not? Are we not tempted to think in the same way and to do likewise?

We have also heard the call to repent spanning most part of our lifetimes. The risk for us would be to lose sight of the element of urgency in the call addressed to us. It would be easy to imagine that we will change... but tomorrow! How often do we not find ourselves thinking, if not actually saying, *I will change, but not just yet... Give me just a little more time... I will sort out this thing that has been bothering me for some time already and I'll do so before too long, but not just today... I will quit sinning tomorrow*. In the meantime, we can content ourselves to hold on to our good intentions without actually acting upon them and therefore getting nowhere with them.

John stressed the need for an immediate U turn. His emphasis was upon choosing life without further ado. When John preached on Jordan's banks, the words he proclaimed solicited a life choice from his listeners in the here and now.

What we know of John's preaching to those who went to him to receive a baptism of repentance draws to our attention the importance for all of us to strive to be honest in our relationship with God, with ourselves and with others.

Repentance requires of us that we engage in a true self-examination; it demands of us that we undertake a genuine moral inventory, not in a way that discourages us, but in a way that leads us to *hope in God's mercy* which is always freely bestowed upon those who repent of their sinful ways.

What we are also called to grasp is that repentance is a step along the way to recovery; it is a gateway onto a path of new life for us. It opens up for us a marvellous future.

We see in the follow-on to the section read from Matthew's gospel this morning how God's gift of the Spirit followed on from John's preaching of the prophetic call to repentance.

You will recall how it was on Jordan's banks that the adult Jesus appeared on the scene, insisting upon being baptised by John – despite John's reluctance to baptise in a baptism of repentance the One who was without sin. Only when Jesus insisted did John comply. At that very moment the Father's voice was heard to say that He was *wonderfully pleased* by His *Beloved Son* upon whom *the Spirit was seen to rest in the bodily form of a dove* – an image which, from the story of Noah in the Book of Genesis (a story alluded to in last Sunday's gospel) heralds a new start for humanity.

A fresh start, a new beginning was heralded for all of us and for the whole of humanity at that extraordinary moment.

Jesus came into this world with the mission *to make all things new*. This remains Christ's mission in our regard today. He comes to renew God's own life within us.

During these Advent days may we experience nothing less than a grace of total regeneration, the grace of God's new creation.

Amen!