

2nd Sunday of Advent (B)
(Isaiah 40:1-5.9-11 / Mark 1:1-8)
06.12.2020
Consolation

“Console my people, console them.”

These words from today’s first reading are addressed to each one of us this morning.

Because of the pandemic, there is a particular actuality to them but in fact, even without Covid-19, these words speak to all men and women of every age and place because each one of us, whether we are ready to acknowledge it or not, stands in need of consolation. In each one of our hearts, there is a corner which longs for comfort, because we are all, in one way or another emotionally, psychologically, or physically wounded. We all long to experience consolation in the brokenness which marks our lives and that of the world.

This morning, the Lord says to you and to me, wherever we are: “Console my people, console them.”

There is one point which is quite confusing in these words: the Lord is asking somebody to act on his behalf. Who is commissioned to console God’s people? For us who are, like Simeon in the Temple, looking forward to the consolation of God’s people (cf. Lk 2:25), we know and we believe that, in Christ, we have the herald of God’s consolation and are shown consolation itself.

Because of the Incarnation, because God is our consolation in the Child Jesus, we are called to become sources of consolation for each another in our turn. The Jewish tradition considers that the command to console is addressed to the prophets. Because the Spirit of prophecy dwells within us, we are all supposed to be prophets of consolation for all God’s people, for all our brothers and sisters in humanity.

It is also important here to clarify what consolation is all about: the Hebrew concept of comfort and consolation includes both the emotion of compassion and the activity of bringing relief.

So the consolation promised by the Lord is not just a gentle tap on the back or some pious words of encouragement. For God, to console his people means that, through us, the Lord is going to do something for every person we meet.

There are two aspects which seem to be particularly connected to the theme of consolation: fear and light.

In the chapters which follow the section from the prophet Isaiah we read this morning, we hear repeated many times over the following words: “Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God” (41:10), “Do not fear, I will help you” (41:13). All these statements culminate in the question: “I, I am he who comforts you; why then are you afraid?” (51:12).

During this time of pandemic, when we are constantly reminded of the threat of Covid-19, we could be so easily tempted to become fearful people. While it is important that we follow the rules imposed by our governments to prevent the spread of the virus, while we must be careful and prudent, it is vital for us not to give in to the insidious and dangerous effects of another virus called fear.

The consolation God wants us to proclaim and to be for one another is an antidote to fear because it is the consolation of a loving presence. In this Advent season, which is in some respects an enforced time of self-isolation and social distancing, an opportunity is offered to us to be imaginative in finding ways to be present to others, particularly the poor

and lonely. By our reassuring presence we must strive to help our brothers and sisters deal with the crippling consequences of fear upon their hearts and upon all our relationships.

The primal curse of sin for Adam and Eve was fear. The blessing of this Advent season is to remind us of the presence of One who frees us from fear and who confides to us the mission to free our brothers and sisters from their anguish by bringing his presence to them.

The second aspect which is linked to the theme of consolation is light. In the Temple, Simeon described the consolation he longed for and which was made visible in the Child Jesus as a light (cf. Lk 2:32). And Zechariah, John the Baptist's father, compared the coming of the Lord to a light given "to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace" (Lk 1:79).

The consolation and the comfort that Christ is for us and that we are called to be for one another really is a beacon of hope and peace. In a way it is not enough to be physically present to others if our presence does not bring them light. What we are called to share is not a blinding and aggressive torchlight but a gentle and reassuring radiance and luminosity which helps people to move on, to go deeper, to tap into the source of peace and strength that is Christ within them.

We have to be vigilant. This month of December is normally a time when many feel more acutely than usual the pain of loneliness. The present pandemic will impact even more on the elderly, on those who are sick at home or in hospital, on children, on those who have lost a loved one recently, on those who struggle with an addiction, on those who live alone and those in prison...

Isaiah's words are here to challenge us: "Console my people, console them." These words should prevent us from giving way to fear or from being cosily settled into laziness.

While we strive to be wise and pay attention to the measures taken by the authorities of our countries against Covid-19, let us be sure to ask the Holy Spirit to help us to be creative and to discover practical ways of consoling and comforting God's people, ways to be really present to one another in a manner that radiates Christ's light into the lives of all men and women.

May the God of patience and consolation who delivered us from all our fears grant us to live in harmony with one another, so that we may be able to console those who are in any kind of affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. (cf. Ps 34:4; Rm 15:5-6; 2Co 1:4)