

Second Sunday of Advent December 04, 2016

Readings: Isaiah 11:1-10 Romans 15:4-9 Matthew 3:1-12

The season of Advent is the time of waiting for the coming of the Lord. We eagerly wait for someone we love. However when we want to receive the person we love, we prepare ourselves for the moment of our meeting. Thus the second Sunday of Advent tells us to be prepared for his coming. The liturgy of today speaks of repentance, personal change of heart, a transformation or conversion. Repentance is more than merely grieving over our sins; it is a call to change for the better. In today's Gospel Matthew presents us John the Baptist as he introduces Jesus to the world. The church chooses him as the personification of the Advent theme as he preaches repentance, transformation of the heart and reform of our lives. He calls people to prepare the way for the Lord and make his paths straight. His words have an advice and warning for each one of us. In the first reading, a prophet sees a new beginning for the royal line of David. His coming will introduce a time of peace. Here Prophet Isaiah informs the people of the Messiah who will judge them by his righteousness and with peace he will rule the earth. He is filled with the wisdom and insight, counsel and power, knowledge and fear of the Lord. In the second reading Paul encourages Jews and gentiles to open themselves to the scriptures and to God's saving grace. God indeed was faithful to the Jews and is merciful to the gentiles. Now filled with hope and expectation Paul asks them to seek peace and reconciliation, accepting each other as Christ has accepted us.

Today's First Reading from the Book of Isaiah consists of a descriptive prophecy related to the coming of the ideal king from David's line. It begins with the proclamation that a shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. Jesse was the father of King David, from whom the Judean kings, descended. The prophet says that the spirit of the Lord will rest upon him. The new king will be committed to God's own moral standards and will be filled with the spirit of God. The prophet is providing a picture of a Messianic era when paradise would be restored. He stresses the images drawn from the Garden of Eden as a dramatic symbol of the universal peace and justice of messianic times. The kind of reign introduced by this ideal king is described in terms that recall the celestial conditions that prevailed in the Garden of Eden. Here we have the wild and domestic animals living in harmony and the young

child could lead them. In such times even in the animal world the animals of prey live in perfect harmony with other animals that are their normal food. He will rule the universe with the uprightness which comes from the goodness of God. His coming brings an era of peace. He represents the end of all conflict and violence. They will rule with the fear of the Lord and in the wisdom of God.

Today's Second Reading Paul reminds the Romans that the Old Testament calls for the people to be steadfast in their difficulties. It also provides encouragement. Here the Apostle tells the Romans that whatever was written in former days was written for their instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures they might have hope. These scriptures prepared them to receive Christ and tell them that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. Here Paul instructs them to live in peace and harmony. He tells them that discord in community is evil and they must accept all and offer each other the sign of peace. He calls them to welcome one another just as Christ welcomed them for the glory of God. He asks them to accept every one with due respect of their human dignity. He prays for them that God may help them all to be tolerant with each other by following the example of Christ Jesus, so that united in mind and voice they may give glory to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It can only be to God's glory, then, they are to treat each other in the same friendly way as Christ treated them. Thus their life as Christians will be manifested by their proclamation among the Gentiles, where they would sing praises in God's name. He tells them that the ministry of Jesus manifested God's fidelity to the Patriarchs and his mercy to the gentiles.

Today's Reading from the Gospel of Matthew begins by telling us that Saint John the Baptist proclaimed a baptism of repentance in the wilderness of Judea. There is no preparation for the entrance of John the Baptist in the Gospel of Matthew. He tells us that in those days he appeared and started preaching repentance and gave them the message of the kingdom of heaven. He tells them to prepare the way of the Lord and make his paths straight. In the desert of Judea it is said, there is a steep slope that falls from the central ridge of the country to the valley of the Jordan and the Dead Sea and it indicates that John the Baptist preached near the river, most likely not far from Jericho. John's message was one of repentance in preparation for the Kingdom of Heaven that was at hand. It is

the same message that Jesus proclaimed when He began His ministry in Galilee saying that they ought to repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near.

Matthew at this juncture explains to the audience who John the Baptist is. He presents only a few details since John was the popular figure and martyr in the early church. Everyone was aware of the holiness and mission of John. He explains about his austerity, poverty, food habits and the presentation of self as a spiritual person. He speaks of him as a desert nomad, clothed in a robe made of camel's hair, fastened with a crude belt. At the same time he also speaks of his popularity saying that the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and the entire region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, after confessing their sins. John the Baptist was indeed a popular figure and showed his prophetic outlook. He is portrayed in images that recall the great prophet Elijah. He is presented to us as a precursor of Jesus, who is the Messiah.

John's task was to straighten out the human hearts and he imparted truth as he saw it: to Herod, to all the people, the Pharisees, Sadducees. He was a voice that summoned people to justice and right and led them to God. The Jews in general respected him and went to him easily to listen to him. His mission was very much the reminder of Prophet Elijah who was identified with fire. Fire is a good symbol as it provides illumination and warmth and at the same time purification. John while preaching and baptizing demonstrated his forthright self that contained a warning and a promise. John's preaching was directed at some of the Scribes and Pharisees. This was the community from which the early church faced strong opposition. Nevertheless the thrust of John's message was clear: the kingdom of God has come and it requires a change of behaviour. The style of his message resembled his life style. When the Pharisees and Sadducees approached him, John was agitated at their hypocrisy. He called them a brood of vipers and viper is a snake whose presence is unsuspected but which hurts and can kill. People in such category could be considered evil and dangerous for others. However he called them to repentance and change of heart for there was room for everyone with God and their hearts could always change for good. He told them that if they were truly repentant they must produce the appropriate fruit and not to presume that they have Abraham their ancestor to give salvation. He reminded them that God's ways are unique. There ought to be repentance in them, meaning radical change.

Matthew wanted to make it very clear that no matter how important John the Baptist is, Jesus is far superior to him. He wanted to tell them that he himself was not the Messiah and the saviour who was coming after him was surely greater than him. In announcing the nearness of the Kingdom of God, John was pointing to Jesus, who had come as the divine fulfilment of the Kingdom. At the same time the Kingdom of God primarily refers to that complex of relationships where people are in perfect harmony with God and with each other and living their lives in his image. Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God in his person indicating the perfect image of his unseen Father and called everyone to follow him closely. As he will say later, he is in fact the Way, truth and life and he will lead them all to the Father. To live in him, through him and with him is to reach the ultimate goal of our existence which is the perfect union with the Father. All of this is included in this simpler proclamation of John, to be repeated later by Jesus himself. Great crowds we are told came from all the surrounding region of Judea and the Jordan valley to hear his powerful call to a change of heart. Those who truly repented of their sinful life acknowledged their sins and went through a cleansing ritual namely a baptism in the River Jordan.

In our Gospel today, repentance is tied to the baptism of John as the people actively sought conversion and were acknowledging their sins. John the Baptist claimed that his baptism would be that of water while the baptism of Jesus would be of the Holy Spirit. John's baptism had no effective power. It was like the rites of the Old Testament were merely symbolic of grace. Its value came from the personal repentance of those who received it. The baptism of Jesus in the Holy Spirit would be far more than symbolic. This baptism would actually affect change in the person in a permanent way by impressing the mark of Christian on the soul. While John's baptism would only signify grace, the baptism of Jesus in the Holy Spirit would actually cause grace. Hence, Jesus Christ introduces a whole new dynamic through the sacraments. No longer would any of the rituals be symbolic or merely sentimental - the rituals of the sacraments would actually become real vehicles for grace. Again, this is most evident in the Eucharist when ordinary bread and wine are changed into the body, blood, soul and divinity of Jesus or in the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, when the infirm receive not only a spiritual healing but a physical healing as well on occasion.

Towards the end of today's Gospel we have the following words of John the Baptist that he was baptizing them with water as a sign of repentance, but one

who was more powerful than he was coming after him and John himself was not worthy to untie his sandals, namely even to be his menial servant. He would baptize them with the Holy Spirit and fire. John in this way directed the people to Jesus who would baptize people with the spirit which ultimately came on the day of Pentecost. That became the sign of repentance which Jesus was to preach and sign of his kingdom. While we cannot see the spiritual Kingdom of God that has come on earth as it is in Heaven, we believe that through the Sacrament of Baptism, we have been admitted into the spiritual Kingdom of God on earth, the mystical Body of Christ to which the Catholic Church is united as the visible image of the invisible. As we prepare the way of the Lord in our lives, we are called to review the status of our disposition towards the grace of God the Father that is manifested through the purifying fire of the Holy Spirit.

Between John and Jesus there are striking similarities. People called John a preacher and Jesus proclaimed the word of God. Both of them came from the desert having spent their time before they began their life of preaching. The audience of both was large crowds and both had a chosen band of disciples. Both of them were challenged by Pharisees and Sadducees. Their central theme was reform, repentance and preaching of the Kingdom. But John's was only a voice, whereas Jesus is the Word. John was a herald, a messenger but Jesus was the reality of the presence of God. John did not seem to have faith in humanity but Jesus was the one who built on the confidence and trust of humanity. John through his teaching brought about guilt feeling. But Jesus gave people hope and filled them with the faith in his Father. We see that hope joy and happiness in the presence of Jesus during the season of Advent.

In this holy season of advent, as we prepare to welcome Christ at Christmas John the Baptist has his words of advice and warnings for each one of us. He advises us to prepare the way of the Lord, by true repentance of our past failures and to have a firm resolution to straighten the ways of the Lord that is not to deviate from the true Christian way of life in the future. During Advent, we are called to be repentant of our sins. We are called to pray unceasingly, to make penance, and to perform acts of charity towards our brothers and sisters in Christ. So, in these remaining days of Advent, let us each commit to taking to heart the message of John the Baptist: to truly repent of our sins in order to make straight the way in our hearts.

A little wave was bobbing along in the ocean, having a grand old time. He's enjoying the wind and the fresh air--until he notices the other waves in front of him, crashing against the shore. "My God, this is terrible," the wave says. "Look what's going to happen to me!" Then along comes another wave. It sees the first wave, looking grim, and it says to him, "Why do you look so sad?" The first wave says, "You don't understand! We're all going to crash! All of us waves are going to be nothing! Isn't this terrible?" The second wave says, "No, YOU don't understand. You're not a wave; you're part of the ocean."

A man was selling balloons at a fair in the tribal village. He had balloons of different colours, including red, yellow, blue, black and green. To attract the attention of children he would release the gas filled balloons into the air. When children saw the balloon go up, they would jump with joy and rush to buy one or more. The balloon man was busy filling the air in the balloon and selling them, he realized someone tugging his shirt sleeves. He looked down and saw a little tribal boy dark in complexion pointing to a black balloon and asking him whether that will go up high. For a moment the person was taken aback asking himself why the boy asked this question. Then seeing his dark complexion he realized the reason for it. He then caressed the boy and said, "Son it is not the colour of the balloon that makes it go up the sky but what is within it that makes it go up. It is the air that I fill in it go up right into the sky." The same thing applies to our lives. It is what is inside that count. The thing inside of us that makes us go up is our attitude.

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