

Second Sunday of Advent December 10, 2017

Readings: Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11; 2 Peter 3:8-14; Mark 1:1-8

We are in the season of Advent, a time of waiting for the Lord who is coming to us. As much as we are waiting for him and place our hope in him we can imagine how much more God is waiting and hoping for each of us personally to come to him. It is the time when God comes to earth as a human person and chooses to live among us. It is the time when God shares his love with us as we should share our love with Him and among ourselves. Advent prepares us to welcome the arrival of the God who became man and who by his example showed how we should share his love with our neighbours. The readings of today tell us about the concern of God for his people and at the same time admonish the people to prepare the way spiritually for the coming of the Lord. Prophet Isaiah tells us that God is ready to intervene in history for the sake of human kind because he is concerned about them. In this passage normally known as the poem of consolation, God shows how he cares for each person individually. God extends his hand of healing to the weary people who are exhausted and he gives them the needed repose. In the second reading Peter speaking strongly against those who denied the second coming of Christ says that the day of the Lord will come in good time and Jesus will come to establish his kingdom of kindness, truth, justice and peace in a new heaven and new earth. The Gospel of today invites us to prepare the way of the Lord, just as John the Baptist did by proclaiming his coming to all. He called them to prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. He proclaimed the Baptism of repentance and announced the coming of Jesus who would baptize them with the Holy Spirit.

The vision of what can happen for those who live by God's word is contained in the first reading of today. Here prophet Isaiah renews his appeal to trust in the Lord their God and invites the people to come home to the Promised Land. The dominant theme contained in this passage is comfort to a weary people. Years of exile in Babylon had weakened them spiritually. The Prophet encourages them to rekindle the faded memories of their homeland and believe that God still has a plan for them and wants them to return. The double message of comfort is the perfect cure for the double service the people have endured for their past sins. Prophet Isaiah in the passage speaks of the earlier call he had to pronounce verdict against the people. Now he hears a voice calling him to say God prepares a highway for them in the desert. The way will be level with no elevations or depressions to impede their progress as they make their way back to Israel. Then the oracle shifts the outlook from Babylon to the former kingdom of David. Jerusalem and the cities of David hear the good news that God is drawing near, leading the once scattered flock of Israel back to familiar pastures. The Good Shepherd so unlike the shepherds of old nourishes the flock and carries the sheep in his arms.

The Second Reading, from the Second Letter of Peter, reminds us, on the one hand, of God's great desire to come into our lives and, on the other, of the need to be prepared for that coming when it happens. Although people sometimes complain that God seems oblivious to their needs, the Letter reminds us that the Lord is not being slow to carry out his promises. We cannot accuse Jesus for his delay in his coming. On the contrary, he is being patient with all, wanting nobody to be lost and everybody to be brought to change his ways. He is really time for people to repent. Peter wants his disciples to understand that the time with

God is different from our knowledge of time. Certainly, people want God's help and comfort but they are not prepared to change their ways, not prepared for a genuine conversion. The author assures us that there will be an end of the world as we know it. He speaks of the heavens and the elements being dissolved by fire. His point is that all that is not holy will be destroyed and there will be a new creation. It is important therefore to let God's holiness and love take over our lives. In order that we allow God to come to us we must also show the desire to go to him. Peter says that those who are constantly in the company of their Lord will be at peace in spite of storms raging around them. For them, the Day of the Lord holds no fears. While they are waiting for the Lord, they must do their best to live lives without spot or stain so that Jesus will find them at peace.

The Gospel today is the beginning of the Good News according to Mark. The opening verse sets the theme for his Gospel: "The beginning of the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God." This sets the stage for all that follows in the entire Gospel. Mark tells us that this is the beginning of the story of Jesus which commences with his life and his ministry but continues on to include our own times. That is the story he wants to tell, or rather, the good news he wants to proclaim, gradually unfolding identity of the man Jesus as the Son of God. This opening verse is also the profession of faith. These words fling us right into the middle of Jesus' reason for coming into the world. In the Gospel Mark tells us that the story of Jesus did not begin with his birth on earth but began in the mind of God from the beginning of times. Mark tells us that he believes Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the anointed one and he is divine, the Son of God. Mark's presentation of the mystery is one of gradually unfolding the identity of the man Jesus. Hence the Gospel presents the picture of a gradual revelation of Jesus built upon strong faith affirmations which is ultimately pronounced by a pagan soldier at the foot of the cross saying, Jesus is truly the Son of God.

The central figure in today's Word of God is John the Baptist and he is presented as one who is preparing the way of the Lord. He does so by speaking to the people of the coming of Jesus as he begins his public life and his mission and at the same time invites them to prepare themselves to welcome him. The story proper begins with the appearance of John the Baptist at the river Jordan with his role as a preacher and baptizer. He comes as a prophet who is proclaiming the word of God and gives a new message to the people. He is presented as a person who had already become famous in his own right. That is clear from the number of people who came out to see him and that he attracted the attention of King Herod and of the religious leaders in Jerusalem. He led a very austere life starting from the desert, dressed in rough clothes made of camel skin and had a poor man's diet. There were no special designer clothes for him. He fed on locusts and wild honey and fasted as well. John clearly presented himself as a man of God and the people admired and trusted him as a person of holiness and integrity. This may have caused people to think that he might be the messiah. He was a man of remarkable austerity; his appearance among them was sudden befitting the sign of messiah who would come from nowhere, his mighty voice that shook them from their slumber and listless attitude. At the same time he lived a totally self-sacrificing life combined with humility. He gave them the message of the kingdom of God and baptized them.

John's message was present not only in his words but also in his whole life. The man was the message. The time of Jesus would be the time of elegance and the messenger was present to make the paths straight, to fill the valleys and cutting into hills. He was like the herald

who would precede the king on a journey, to announce to the inhabitants of the arrival of the King and make smooth the ill-kept roads. He was indeed different from the other preachers of their time. He taught them with courage and bluntly made them aware of their sinfulness. His essential message was one of repentance. The word Repent here does not mean just being sorry for the past or the performance of penance. It is a call for them to do much more than that, to change their ways, to have a change of heart. To repent in the Gospel involves a radical transformation in our way of living. It means a conversion, a real turning around, a re-directing of one's whole life. The outward sign of his preaching and ministry was baptism in the river Jordan. It was just an external sign and the Jews were fully aware of such symbolism of ritual washing. There is a further reflection we might make today concerning the role of John the Baptist. For he should help us to reflect that there have been many John the Baptists in our own lives, many people who have helped us to find Jesus, to know, love and serve him better. A second point is that John the Baptist reminds us that we, too, have the responsibility to proclaim the Good News of Jesus and to help people know him and love him and experience his love in their lives just as other people have brought us to where we are. It is not easy in our society to find Jesus and to accept his values and vision of life.

The Gospel of today shows us that the advent of Jesus must be understood as a part of God's saving plan. God fulfilled the plan he had for us when creation began. He raised us to the dignity of divine sonship by the incarnation and made us inherit the kingdom of God. John the Baptist emerges here as the immediate precursor of Jesus. Mark attributes this prophecy to Isaiah but in fact it also combines phrases from the Exodus and the prophet Malachi. By combining the Old Testament texts Mark shows that John the Baptist brings together the Old Testament tradition of promise for which Jesus is the fulfilment. As precursor, John prepares the people by calling them to reorient their lives and turn back to God. This is symbolized by the proclamation of the Baptism of repentance. Mark also wants the reader to make the connection between John the Baptist and Elijah, another great Old Testament prophet who called Israel to repentance and was expected to return before the coming of the Messiah. John does what Elijah did and he looks as if he is presenting the ways of Elijah.

Mark's story was in fact the greatest good news that man had ever received on earth. It is still the greatest, most astounding and at the same time most consoling news for us today. We know that Jesus has come into history and will come again to accept us all unto himself. But just as there were those in Palestine who did not accept Christ's claim to be what he manifested himself to be, for as John tells us that he came unto his own and his own did not receive him, so also today many are unwilling to believe in him and receive him. The Evangelists tell us that that it was their stubborn pride and self-centeredness, the exaggerated sense of their own dignity and perfection, which blinded the eyes of the intellectuals. The result was that they could not see in Jesus their Messiah and their saviour. He became human person like us so that he could teach us how valuable God made us and how important we are to him. Today the world that has developed so much and is experiencing progress every day make people feel that they do not need God and they have everything explained in the universe. Indeed the Good News we heard today opens our eyes to the reality that our God cares for us and is concerned about us.

On this second Sunday of Advent we continue our preparations for the coming of Jesus. That is, we are preparing to celebrate his coming among us as a new-born baby in Bethlehem. Therefore, it is a special time for us to remember with deep gratitude God's great love for us. The Word of God reminds us that God so loved the world that he sent his only Son for our sake that we may have life through him. Again he is the Word was made flesh and came to live among us. The coming of the Lord does not fill his friends with fear and anxiety but rather with a kind of joyful anticipation of one friend to another. The fruit of everyday living the Way of Jesus is a real interior peace that makes us ready to meet him at any time. He invites us to reflect and examine our conscience to see the place of God in our life. The advent is a time for preparation, to straighten the path and fill the valleys and make full preparation for the one who is going to come into our lives. Our God is a waiting God and he is eagerly waiting for our invitation in order to enter into our lives. He is a God of patience and is ready to wait in love. Let us reflect then at this time on what changes we should make in our own lives, not just now but in the year to come, to be the kind of persons, God would like us to be.

The message from today's readings tells us to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord Jesus. With the approaching of Christmas, the day when we will be celebrating the incarnation of God on earth, we are reminded how the people of the Old Testament waited for the arrival of Baby Jesus as the promised Messiah. Through the New Testament readings, we are reminded of the patience of the Lord in His second and final coming that will serve the purpose of our salvation, the Lord not wanting any to perish. It is true that we must work so that the "new heavens and new earth" begin to take shape here on earth; but such intense prayer "does not distract us from our commitment to history: by opening our heart to the love of God it also opens it to the love of our brothers and sisters, and makes us capable of shaping history according to God's plan." Holiness and prayer are the beginning and the essential precondition of any Christian action in the world.

One day a young lady was driving along with her father. They came upon a storm, and the young lady asked her father, what should I do?" He said "keep driving". Cars began to pull over to the side, the storm was getting worse. What should I do?" The young lady asked? "Keep driving," her father replied. On up a few feet, she noticed that eighteen wheelers were also pulling over. She told her dad, "I must pull over, I can barely see ahead. It is terrible, and everyone is pulling over!" Her father told her, "Don't give up, just keep driving!" Now the storm was terrible, but she never stopped driving, and soon she could see a little more clearly. After a couple of miles she was again on dry land, and the sun came out. Her father said, "Now you can pull over and get out." She said "But why now?" He said "When you get out, look back at all the people that gave up and are still in the storm. Because you never gave up your storm is now over.

One day, a man was walking along the shore. As he looked down the beach, he saw a young person reaching down to the sand, picking up something and very gently throwing it back into the sea. As he got closer, he called out, "Good morning! What are you doing?" The young person paused, looked up and replied, "Throwing starfish into the sea." Why are you throwing starfish into the sea?" he asked. "The sun is up and the tide is going out. If I don't throw them in they'll die." "But, don't you realize that there are miles of beach here and starfish all along it. You can't possibly make a difference!" The young person listened

politely. Then knelt down, picked up another starfish and threw it into the sea, past the breaking waves and said..."Made a difference to this one."

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