

Second Sunday of Advent: December 09, 2018

Baruch 5:1-9; Philippians 1:3-6, 8; Luke 3:1-6

This season of Advent heralds the coming of Emmanuel, "God with us". It is the time we realize when our God comes to earth to take on human form and live on earth just as we live. He does it as he shares his life and love with us. When God shares his love with us he invites us to share our love with Him and with others. Advent is the time of waiting as we prepare ourselves to welcome the God who became man and who by example showed us how we too should be able to live like him for others. Advent means waiting. We wait for someone we love and we long to meet that person. In today's Gospel Luke beautifully places the beginning of John the Baptist's ministry within a historical context. He sets John's ministry in historical time by telling his audience who the leaders were in the region. John's role was to prepare the way for Jesus and to proclaim a theme of repentance for those who chose to follow Jesus. He also explains the role of John the Baptist in the context of the mission of Jesus. Like any army is busy filling shallow places and leveling mountains to make roads, so also is John's job to make the pathway smooth for those coming to Jesus. The chronological data given here are more detailed in Luke, indicating that the Ministry of Jesus starts immediately after the preaching and baptizing of John. Today's message comes to us through the scripture readings that we should continue to prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ in our world and into our lives.

In the first reading Prophet Baruch reminds the people of Israel that they have to share the gift of joy with others by calling them to put on the garment of integrity. God is asking them not to be part of the sad story of corruption. In this reading God is assuring that he will flatten any high mountains and fill any deep valleys in order to make the ground level. This is an invitation to change their external behaviour and reconcile them with the Lord. In this prophetic song God promised to bring back His people from exile in Babylon. The Reading begins by giving the people hope and confidence, inviting them to stop mourning for the past and prepare to celebrate the future. They should replace the robes of mourning with garments fashioned from the justice and glory of God. The garment of our sorrow and afflictions is death and suffering that have come upon the Israelites because of their disobedience. The word glory appears repeatedly in the reading. The problem for them was the way to keep their faith. Jerusalem once ruined by faithless policies of its kings, will become a standard of faith for the entire world to see. The Temple was far away and they were living in a culture completely

opposed to their Jewish tradition. The prophecy states that God would bring His people back to Jerusalem. Through sin the humankind has experienced spiritual death and the absence of the Divine Presence of God. Jerusalem is personified as a mother about to receive back her exiled children.

In the second reading, we have the apostle Paul stating that he prays with joy for the Philippians, his loyal partners in work of evangelization. He was praying for them to be blameless and pure. He prayed that they may have the grace to discern between right and wrong, good and evil. We too like the Philippians must be known to be men and women of goodwill. We can be witnesses to the world and to one another by maintaining our Christian morals and values. Actually as Paul makes clear that believers will triumph because God the Father will begin and complete his good work in them. Twice Paul says that he prays for his converts that they succeed in their life of love. Unfortunately, many times people look for personal pleasure without Christian responsibility. This leads to a situation of losing the sense of sin. Paul himself a prisoner of the Romans, now praises the Philippians for their kindness and hospitality. He was grateful that they took care of him during his stay among them and he respected their hospitality. This reminds us to be aware of our own Christian uprightness, especially in treating those who are poor and less fortunate than we are. He tells them that the grace that enables them to grow in union with god had been won for them through the sacrifice of Christ for them.

Today's Gospel Reading presents us the words of John the Baptist, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth: and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." He calls out, "Prepare a way for the Lord," and his words are equally meant for us as for the people he directly spoke to. He comes "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins," says Luke. There are three words there which are closely linked - baptism, repentance, and forgiveness. Baptism is the call to be initiated in the life of Jesus and be cleansed from all blemishes. It is a symbolic action through which people expressed their reconciliation with God by their immersion in the waters of the River Jordan hoping that their desire to have their evil past totally washed away. 'Repentance' is the forgiveness of sins and is understood as metanoia, meaning change of Heart not just sorrow for past sins but a total and radical change of outlook in our relationship with God and other people. It calls for a radical and genuine renewal and conversion of heart. It

signifies new outlook on life in keeping with the will of God. This metanoia or conversion in turn will bring about the forgiveness of sin. Forgiveness means a letting go, liberation from the chains of sin and evil. Forgiveness is seen as the dropping off of heavy baggage or burdens. Forgiveness involves a total reconciliation with our God and our neighbours and it is a healing, a making whole.

Luke never wants his Gospel seem disconnected from the history, both secular and religious and that is why he gives the details of important civil and religious leaders as John the Baptist comes on the scene. Five of his seven historical figures are secular and remaining two is religious. Among the secular figures all the individuals mentioned are corrupt, cruel, and barbaric and depraved in contrast to the righteousness of John the Baptist. In the middle of history that John starts his prophetic mission. He received his call in the desert which reminds us of the original chosen people whose identity was formed in the exodus through the desert. The desert is a place of being alone with God. We go into the desert when we take time off our normal job and household occupation to be with God in church, in prayer, in reading the word of God. The desert is the place where we encounter God. We ourselves must take the first step to go into the desert, to reach out to God, to look for God. Once we open our hearts to God in the desert, God Himself comes and fills us up. A saint once said that when we take one step to God, God takes two steps to us. At this stage God takes the initiative to come to us, to fill us, to renew us, to transform us, to remould us into God's image that we are created to be.

John is now calling for a renewed exodus from the people chosen by God. The people were told to prepare a way for the Lord. They have to straighten the path to receive the power of the Lord. This was how each one was to have the personal experience in our own heart of the saving power of God. John proclaims the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The only baptism Judaism practiced was one for the initiation of the proselytes or converts into the community. Perhaps this was not the mind of John the Baptist. Luke surely had in his mind the idea of the Christian baptism in the early church. This baptism first required the submission of one's will to God. Second in baptism we are invited to conform ourselves to God's will. Thirdly, it granted inclusion with the restored people of God.

Luke connects the call of John the Baptist to the passage from Prophet Isaiah chapter 40. This is indeed the true proclamation of the new exodus led by our

Lord. For Luke this new exodus will begin with John's proclamation and it will be fulfilled in the life and ministry of Jesus. What Isaiah says is taken up by John the Baptist and effected by Jesus for the sake of the humanity. All people will hear the word of God and see his great works and respond in faith. It will come through Jesus who will heal the sick, who will help the weak, who will forgive the sinner, who will give hope to the hopeless, who will give life, real life, to all who open their hearts to him. Once Jesus comes the world will not be the same and cannot remain the same. John the Baptist challenged them: he called them to baptism, repentance and forgiveness and thus prepare them to receive Jesus. He called them to reaffirm themselves to a new way of living, to a new commitment to the community, and finally to Jesus who is the God who has come to live with us.

The preaching of John the Baptist which echoed and re-echoed around the river Jordan, in ring a joyful tone around us today also. John's mission was to preach repentance, to get the people to turn back to God, and it was customary among the Jews to go through the external rites of washing to represent internal cleansing of the heart. The place Jordan was opportune and symbolic of the repentance of the chosen people of God. He was preparing the people to receive the chosen one of God. We are preparing ourselves to receive Christ at Christmas and the prophet tells us how we should prepare ourselves if the welcome we give our saviour is to be sincere and true. Even the best and the holiest among us have to admit that our paths namely our dealings with God have to be smooth and straight. When a king or a person of high rank was to visit another king or the dignitary, the host sent his slaves to level the paths and smooth the roads for the guest's camels. Similarly it is necessary for people to prepare their minds and smooth their consciences by wiping away all that can be offensive to God. Such building up of fervour would be a good way to prepare the coming of the messiah.

In his mission, John remains humble, and when Jesus came to him in order to be baptized by him, John seems to object at first: "Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, «I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me? » But Jesus answered him, «Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness. » Then he consented." (Mt. 3:13-15) John remains humble in his mission: if the love of God is in him, it does not belong to him to show it to anyone, even at this supreme moment when he is called to baptize He who is

Love in person. To receive the grace of God in humility: that is how one prepares for the coming of the Son of God! The Virgin Mary did this until the much-awaited day when the Word of God became incarnate in her. In the early church indicated the working of the community in harmony to build the new spirit in the community. Today, the grace of God is still offered to us, particularly in the Eucharist, where we receive within us the very author of grace.

The Gospel reminds us that our own role is not unlike that of John the Baptist. Like him, each one of us has a mission to communicate the Spirit of Christ and his message of hope, love, freedom and peace to others. To help people fill their valleys and make their rough paths smoother. A word of affirmation and encouragement can work wonders. To have a naturally cheerful disposition can be a real witness of Christian joy. John heard the word of God in the desert. Our cities and towns are often such busy places and our lives are often so hectic. We really do need some quiet so that we can hear God speaking to us. Some have the custom of going once a year or so to a retreat house and that is excellent. But there are other times, too, when we need simply to stop doing everything, cut out all noise and listen to ourselves and to our God.

Christmas is the commemoration of the greatest gift of the mercy of God bestowed on this world. The feast invites us to turn ourselves to God in gratitude and repentance and experience his abounding mercy. Christ will come to us with the salvation of God and we can confidently hope to live the coming year with gratitude to our Father in heaven. During the course of this week, let us reflect upon our spiritual ancestors, our saintly brothers and sisters, who have gone out from Jerusalem so we may share in the joy of the Gospel of Christ. Let us reflect upon their message which has become our message. Let us prepare ourselves to celebrate the past coming of the Lord that is commemorated on Christmas day. Let us constantly pray for each other with joy in every one of our prayers. Through our participation in the sharing of the Gospel as instruments of the Holy Spirit, let us be confident that He will bring the good works of Christ to its completion before the final coming of the Lord at the end of the world.

When passing through a mountain pass, a villager once came across an old man who was blind and who seemed to be afflicted with various ailments all over his body. It was clear that he was wasting away. He was even paralyzed and was constantly forced to remain in a seated position. The Villager could clearly hear him say, "All praise is for God who has kept me safe from ailments with which He has tested many among His creation; and He has indeed preferred me over many

among those that He created." "My brother!" exclaimed the man. "What have you been saved from? By God? I think that you have been afflicted with every single kind of ailment!" "Go away from me," said the old man, as he raised his head. "Do I not still have a tongue with which I can pronounce His Oneness, and with which I can remember Him every single moment? And do I not still have a heart with which I can know Him?" These words of the old man were enough for the Villager to repent to God for his sins and ask Him for forgiveness. Remember, there is always someone else who is in more problem than you.

Fr. Eugene Lobo S.J. Bangalore India