

Advent 2 A

Our Lady of Good Counsel, Surrey

4 December 2011

Last Sunday we began the season of Advent. It was the beginning of the Church year, but also the beginning of our using – together with all Catholics in the English-speaking world – the new translation of the Roman Missal. It will still take some getting used to, and we shouldn't worry about that. Instead, we should see this change as a providential occasion to understand more deeply the beautiful words of the Mass which the Church gives us so that we might worship with ever greater attention, devotion and participation.

Prophet Isaiah

On this Second Sunday of Advent our first reading from the Word of God comes from the Prophet Isaiah, who announced to the Israelites, tried by decades of bitter exile in Babylon, liberation at last: “Comfort, O comfort my people,” the Prophet says in God’s name. “Speak

tenderly to Jerusalem” (Is 40:1-2). This is what the Lord wishes to do for us this Advent: to speak to our hearts and through us to the whole of humanity, to proclaim salvation. Today, too, the Church raises her voice: “Make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (Is 40:3). For the peoples worn out by poverty and hunger, for refugees and for all who are suffering grave violations of their rights, the Church stations herself like a watchman on the lofty mountain of faith and proclaims: “Here is your God! See, the Lord God comes with might” (Is 40:10).

This prophetic announcement is finally accomplished in Jesus Christ who, with his preaching and, later, with his Death and Resurrection, brought the ancient promises to fulfilment.¹

Gospel: John the Baptist

¹ Cf. Benedict XVI, Angelus (7 December 2008).

Today the Gospel presents to us the austere figure of John the Baptist, the forerunner or herald of the coming of Jesus, the one who was to prepare his way, to alert us to the Lord's coming among us and for us. His mission was to clear the way for the Lord, calling the people of Israel to repent of their sins and to correct every injustice.

As reported in St. Mark's Gospel we just heard proclaimed, John's preaching has two aspects: first, he preached repentance and baptism for the forgiveness of sins; second, he announced the coming, after him, of a mightier One who would baptize with the Holy Spirit.

John the Baptist is a prophet situated between the Old Covenant and the New. He is like a star that heralds the rising of the Sun, of Christ, the Messiah.²

² Cf. Benedict XVI, Angelus (5 December 2010).

1. Call for Repentance

Now let's look at the Baptist's appeal for conversion. It is a pressing invitation to open our hearts to receive the Son of God, who comes among us. His clear words are particularly helpful for us, men and women of our time, in which the way of preparing for Christmas unfortunately all too often suffers from a materialistic way of thinking and acting.³

The "Lord" himself is coming – and his way must be prepared.

John has in mind a preparation similar to that for kings and heroes of old: rolling out the red carpet is not a modern invention. Dignitaries of old had the road "prepared" for them: levelled, smoothed, made more accessible. It always took some work to get ready for the arrival of a great personage.

³ Cf. Benedict XVI, Angelus (9 December 2007).

What John proclaimed was not “come as you are – and stay that way” but, citing the Prophet Isaiah: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight” (Mk 1:3).

Note that the Baptist’s cry was first heard “in the wilderness” (Mk 1:4). He heard his call in the desert. Indeed, prophets – like all of us – meet God where there is some silence, where we are not “stuffed full” of all the things of the world, but exist on the bare essentials of life.

The people went to him in the desert (cf. Mk 1:5). They couldn’t hear the proclamation where they were. The Baptist demanded that people “do something” – with the help of God. They must prepare.

How do they prepare for this coming of the Lord? By conversion, by repentance, a turning away from the darkness of the past, to the light of the future.

Realizing our need for repentance is not depressing – at least not if we can do something about it. When we recognize our failures, we can own up to our need for the Lord. Acknowledging one’s sin is the beginning of new life. As men and women of faith, we believe that our desire for forgiveness will not go unanswered by the Lord who shepherds us, carries us, and gather us into loving arms. God wants none of us to perish, but that we enjoy “abundant life” (cf. Jn 10:10) in him.

How Do We Respond to the Baptist’s Call for Repentance?

If our desire for forgiveness is to be sincere, we must still do some hard work. Conversion is a slow and difficult process. Few of us want to review the comfortable-if-imperfect habits of a life-time. Sure, I’m willing to admit, like the next guy, that “I’m not perfect and I’ve got my faults” – but I prefer to leave them vague so that I never have to

do anything about them.

A general sense of sinfulness is not very helpful; it induces guilt without any remedy for change.

True followers of Jesus are willing to submit themselves to honest confrontation with the specifics of their lives that need changing. And then they submit themselves to the power of God's mercy in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Going to confession, making a good confession, is the very best way to respond to the Baptist's call to make straight the way of the Lord (cf. Mk 1:3).

2. Pointer to Christ

Besides calling for conversion, John the Baptist also points out with clarity the cause and source of our salvation. He looks forward to the one who was "more powerful" (Mk 1:7) and who will baptize not just with water but with the Holy Spirit (cf. Mk 1:8). That's why in

pictures and statues he is often portrayed with his finger pointing away from himself to the one who was coming: Jesus Christ.

The Baptist reminds us that God comes! Not yesterday, not tomorrow, but even today, now! The one true God, “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,” is not a God who is alone in his Heaven, unconcerned with us and our history, but he is the-God-who-comes to his people. He is the Lord who wants to come, to dwell among us, to stay with us. Why did he come? He is motivated by the desire born of love to free us from sin and death, from all that prevents our true happiness. Quite simply, God comes to save us.⁴

The Gospel says that Christ will baptize us with his own with the Holy Spirit. He gives us a share in his divine life. Because of this Baptism, which we have all received, the Holy Spirit comes to dwell

⁴ Cf. Benedict XVI, Homily (16 December 2007).

within each of us.

And so no one who comes to Christ and is washed in the waters of Baptism walks the wild and rocky road of life alone. God is so much with us that, in the person of the Holy Spirit, God is within us. No wonder that another name often given to the Holy Spirit is “the Comforter.”

Conclusion

In today’s readings, then, the Prophet Isaiah and John the Baptist tell us that the Lord is coming – indeed he is already here. Yet we must prepare to recognize, listen to and receive him. Above all this means acknowledging his mercy and receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation before Christmas. Show your gratitude to the Lord that he has sent his Son among us to be with us and to give us his presence in the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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