

Third Sunday of Advent C/2006

When someone hiking has walked many miles and is about to come to the end of his walk, he is really happy. The hiking may have been harsh, tiring and exhausting, but when the end of the trail is there before him, he feels a real joy. In spite of suffering and fatigue endured, he is happy because he has been able to come to the end. He is joyful because he is about to attain our objective.

All the readings of this third Sunday of Advent bring us in a similar situation of rejoicing, because the Lord is nearer us now than he was before. He comes to meet us; he is closer to us than ever. He comes to our encounter. For that reason, we have to rejoice and be glad.

This encounter with the Lord has a double meaning. First of all, it is a spiritual event whose foundation is in the hope of the second coming of the Lord Jesus, as he has promised. Second, it is an existential event, in the sense that the more we advance in age and get older, the more we move close to the encounter with the Lord through death. However, this should not let us live in anxiety, but in the joy of hoping to see the Lord face-to-face and living with him at our side, forever.

In today's first reading, the prophet Zephaniah situates such a joy in the liberation God is about to bring to his people. There will never more punishment for Jerusalem, the rebel city, for its sins, nor will anything bad happen to it again. All its enemies will be defeated, because God himself will reign in the midst of his people as his Savior. His love will reign over his people and sin will have no more hold over them.

As we listen to this prophecy, and see around us and in our world wars, violence, injustice and social confusion, ... we are reminded that our God is a rejoicing God, a God of hope, who will triumph over sin and malice. For that reason, we should not let our arms go limp, because his love and joy will ultimately prevail over all negative forces of evil. As we struggle every day in our own lives, with our own difficulties without knowing sometimes what do, the prophet reminds us that life has a meaning, even when it looks like a failure, because God loves us and has a plan of salvation which he is about to implement for each one of us.

In other words, our faith in Jesus Christ should give us courage and certainty that anything that is happening in our lives, as weary as it might be, cannot escape God's plan. In spite of countless problems crossing our lives, the life of each of us can only end up well, because God loves us.

What are the consequences of God's joy on Christian community? For St. Paul, when God's joy reigns over his people they become a rejoicing people. As we heard in the second reading, they turn to be kind, serene, thankful in prayer and peaceful in the Lord. That is true for all those who have some spiritual experience. But this is to say also that if we have not come to such a quality of being before the Lord, we have to strive to attain it. In this respect, Advent comes to our rescue to shake us up, to push us to become better and better in improving continually our relationship with the Lord and with one another.

Because our God is a rejoicing God, how can we share in his joy? How can we prepare ourselves to the joyful encounter with him? The Gospel answers to that question just with one word: conversion. As a matter of fact, the crowd of the various peoples who went to listen to John the Baptist has just one concern, namely not to miss the opportunity to make peace with God. And this is what Advent is all about.

The crowd asked John, “What shall we do”? It is very striking to see that in this Gospel John does not propose them some spiritual exercises to do, but rather very concrete acts without which their conversion toward the Lord would have no sense at all. In my view, by focusing on such concrete acts like sharing, justice and peace, John would like to tell us that Christian faith has a practical and material dimension which should not be dissociated from a spiritual one. Jesus renders it in a very simple way when he says that the greatest of the commandments is to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves, and these two are just one.

The consequence of such an understanding is that any time we neglect to care for our fellow human beings, under some obscure spiritual reasons, we are far from the Lord and we have to convert.

What are the points of conversion John proposes? – “Whoever has...should share”. The first point is through sharing: Beloved, we live in a culture of selfishness, where what counts most is only “my problems, my concerns, my desires, my joy”. Is there anything we can do to share in this Christmas feast with others, especially the needy and the abandoned? How can we live our joy only in the solitude of our own home? Let us free our joy so that it may become public; let us share it with those who are in sorrow. Let us make our joy contagious.

- “Even the tax collectors came... He answered them, “Stop collecting more than what is prescribed”. As you can see, the second point of conversion is through justice and honesty. Who among us, including myself, has never taken advantage of the poor and the unprotected? How much are we severe towards the mistakes and sins of others than for ourselves? What about the foreigners or people who do not have the same color of skin with us?

- “Soldiers also asked...He told them...be satisfied with your wages”. The third point is that of peace. We are called to live in peace with one another and to look for reconciliation with one another in any case of conflict. Another way of making peace is being in peace with yourself. Be content with what you have. I suspect that Christmas will leave a hole in some wallet or bank accounts. Can we do something?

There are many ways of being joyful in Christmas! The Baptist is showing us the best that leads to true joy. May God bless you all!



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