

Third Sunday of advent A/2007

Human life is crossed by difficulties, suffering and at times by serious setbacks. When facing such situations, people easily fall into despair, especially when they have tried everything in their power in order to change the situation without success. It is in similar situation that the people of Israel found themselves after many exiles and consecutive deportations that struck their country.

While everything looked gloomy and without hope, suddenly, the prophet Isaiah came out to invite the people to joy by announcing them a consolation from the Lord. What strikes most is that while Israel expected a political liberation, the prophet enlarges the perspective and includes a spiritual dimension to the liberation. The God, who is expected to set his people free, is also the One who will restore the physical integrity of the sick and the disabled persons.

Thus, the prophet can say: "Here is your God; he comes with vindication; with divine recompense, he comes to save you. Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the deaf be cleared; the lame will leap like a stag and the tongue of the mute will sing". As though all that was not enough, the liberation takes a cosmic dimension to the point Isaiah speaks of the earth that will be transformed. The desert and the parched land will exult, the steppe will rejoice and bloom, he says.

Was this message of Isaiah a utopia? From the historical point of view, we have to recognize that Israel had had a real hard time to see the fulfillment of this prophecy, because of the multiple deportations they went through. The message of liberation and its promise, however, remained alive in the hearts of many and sustained their hope in difficult times. It was in that perspective that the idea of the coming of the Messiah took shape in Israel. In fact, it was believed that when the Messiah will come everything will be changed for the best. Not only will the land be regenerated, and the weak members of the community strengthened, but even the sick will recover full health.

It is in the line of that messianic expectation that John the Baptist presented his message in order to prepare the people to the coming of the Messiah. The problem, however, is that while John's preaching was on God's imminent judgment, Jesus' preaching focused particularly on God's patience and mercy, and thereby, on conversion. This difference of vision explains why John sent his disciples to question Jesus if he was the Messiah or they should wait for another.

In his response, Jesus shows clearly that the prophecy of Isaiah is completely fulfilled in him. As a proof: under his action, the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them. In other words, Jesus is really the Messiah promised and awaited by Israel, but his vision of his mission is far different from that the people and the Baptist had; his conception is not that of a vindictive God, but that of a merciful God who is patient and forgiving even if he can also judge.

Another striking point is that in his meeting with the disciples of John, Jesus does not jump on their question to say that he is the Messiah. He let them see what he

does. This means that those who meet Jesus should work out from what they hear and see and make a decision of faith in his favor. The decision of faith belongs to us and us alone; we have to make it or to miss it.

From the attitude of John the Baptist and that of Jesus, we learn two things. In fact, John's conception of the Messiah is totally different from that of Jesus. This fact teaches that our ideas about God are very often based on human reasoning, and human ways of thinking. And yet, God is ever beyond our thoughts and our imagining. We will never cease being surprised and even confused by God's ways of dealing with us. God is always more than what we can think and say about him. Our speeches on him will never exhaust the truth of who he really is.

The second point, I would like to present it under the form of challenges to take up. – The first challenge is about the problem of suffering. We saw that, in spite of the promise of the liberation that the Messiah was about to bring, Israel went through many toils and sufferings. This fact raises a question: given our own situation where we are confronted with crisis of life, setback in marriages, the loss of our dear beloved ones, and sometimes evident failures in our undertakings, is it possible to suffer and to keep believing in God like the Israelites? That is the challenge we have to take up today in our modern culture.

- The second challenge is about doubt and perplexity. We saw in the Gospel that, in spite of John's preaching about Jesus, he was not sure whether Jesus was the Messiah or not. And yet, Jesus recognized him as the greatest among the children born of women and who has prepared the way for him. This fact raises a question: Can faith go together with doubt and perplexity?

The answer to this question can but be positive. Faith does not necessarily suppress the doubt or the suffering. Where there is doubt, we have to inquire and to let ourselves be guided in order to find true answer to our problem. Where we face any kind of suffering, we need patience and endurance until the Lord visits us and sets us free. That is what St James proposes us in his letter.

For St James, we have to act like the farmer who works hard and does all that he can in his field by digging, sowing, watering and weeding. Even if the farmer knows that not everything depends on him, but on God; what he does first is to work hard. It is only after having given all that he could that he can sit down and waits patiently that God does his part. In our sorrow and sufferings, in our doubt and perplexity, we are invited to do the same thing, that is, to do whatever we can to get rid of our problems. After we have fulfilled our duties, we put everything into God's hands and wait him with patience and courage. May this time of Advent help us to do that and make good decision in favor of Jesus!

Isaiah 35, 1-6a. 10; Saint James 5, 7-10; Matthew 11, 2-11



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