

3rd Sunday of Advent A/2010

When we are having a bad time, we hope for a consolation. When we are overwhelmed and beaten up with problems, we want to be comforted and lifted up by families, friends and relatives, etc. Consolation and comfort we hope for are an expression of a deep desire which is in each one of us, especially when things do not go well. This third Sunday of Advent reminds us that God is coming in order to console us and to lift us up.

In the first reading, Isaiah speaks to the people of Israel who are about to return from the Babylonian exile. While everything seems to be gloomy and the Israelites are overwhelmed with grief, he announces a vision of a restored land and a revived people.

God will visit the land again; the whole country will be transformed and bloom with abundant flowers like Lebanon, Carmel and Sharon. Everywhere will come joyful songs and the cry of gladness when sorrow and mourning will disappear and God will console his people. The Lord, who comes, will not only save the land, he will also heal the sick in the land so that the blind will see, the deaf will hear and the dumb speak.

If that is the case, therefore, the Israelites have to be strong, courageous and strengthen each other, especially those among them whose hands are feeble, whose knees are weak, and whose hearts are frightened.

What is behind this text is the idea that our Lord is a God of consolation. When we are beaten down and do not know what to do any more, he can change our situation for the best. As he did with the people of Israel, he can do today with anyone who calls upon him. Another idea is the importance of courage we need to have in difficult times. When we have problems, very often we tend to forget that God is with us. We give the impression of desperately fighting alone. All that brings us to the idea of God's time. In fact, God has his time to intervene and put an end to our hardships. What we need to do is to trust him and persevere in hope in spite of our hardships.

Because God's time is not human time, the people of Israel waited for so long before seeing the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah. Over the years, as they went from exile to exile, they were wondering when God will eventually fulfill his promise. It was in that perspective that the idea of the coming of the Messiah took shape in Israel.

And when John the Baptist spoke about Jesus to the Israelites, he saw in him the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. The problem, however, is that John's conception of the Messiah was of somebody who comes to judge the world right away. Jesus, rather, conceived his mission as announcement of God's mercy toward sinners and an invitation to the conversion of heart.

This difference of vision is the reason why John sent his disciples to question Jesus if he was the Messiah or should they wait for another. Jesus' response shows clearly that the prophecy of Isaiah is completely fulfilled in him. 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.

This difference of vision teaches something we should always remember, namely that our ideas about God are very often based on human reasoning and sometimes on human ways of thinking. In truth, God is beyond our thoughts and our imagining. He will ever surprise us and even confuse us in his ways of dealing with us. He is more than what we can say about him and our discourse will never exhaust the truth of who he really is.

Another thing we learn from the Gospel is the primacy of acts over words. At times we say that what someone does is more important than what he says. We see that manifest in the life of Jesus. In fact when the disciples of John questioned him about his identity, he did not say, "Here am I, the Messiah". Rather, he let them see what he was doing and determine themselves what he was. The point is that anyone who wants to meet Jesus will never be forced to accept him, but should come to a personal decision of faith after having listened to his word.

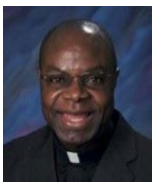
After all that, Jesus could pay tribute to John as an ambassador of God. Like the prophet, John the Baptist had God's wisdom in his mind, God's truth on his lips and God's courage in his heart. However, he was more than a prophet, because he was the herald of the coming of the Messiah in the world. The challenge we have today, as it was in the time of Jesus, is to believe in the people God sends us in order to talk to us.

The time of Advent we celebrate is the time where we are reminded that Jesus will come back. The thing is that we do not know when it will happen. In our culture of fast food and fast things, people have problems with waiting. Waiting in line, waiting the train, waiting the bus or waiting the plane... has become more problematic than ever. The consequence is that we run the risk of transposing into our faith what we do in society. And yet, we have to await the return of Christ.

In this time of waiting, St James is inviting us to patience like the farmer who has to wait for his crops until the early and the late rains have come. As the farmer needs patience to wait until nature does its work, so should we keep our patience until Christ comes back.

During this time of waiting, we must stand firm in our faith and hold each other in esteem. We have to treat each other with respect and restrain from easy judgment that can make our living together, as disciples of Jesus, impossible. At the example of the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord, we have to accept with courage the sufferings of the present time, knowing well that the Lord is near in order to deliver us. That is the grace we have to ask in this celebration. May God bless you all!

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



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