

Second Sunday of Advent B/2011

The readings of this second Sunday of Advent invite us to prepare the way in our heart for the coming of the Lord. They invite us especially to a spiritual renewal and a change of life in the waiting of the return of the Lord.

In the first reading, the prophet Isaiah recalls the mission of the servant of God sent to comfort the people of Israel who were in exile and were awaiting their liberation. The mission he has received is double. It concerns the return of the people to their mother land and their spiritual renewal consecutive to their political liberation.

Because God has decided to set them free, their punishment has come to an end and their sins are forgiven. God himself will come in their midst like a shepherd in order to feed his people, to gather them and to care for them. Therefore, they have to prepare for him a way in making straight the wasteland and the mountains, the rugged land and the rough country. Then, the glory of the Lord will appear and all the people will see it together.

What is behind this text is the idea that whatever might be the problems we go through, God is capable of stepping in and transforming a hopeless situation into a liberation event. Another idea is the fact that God cares for the good of his people. That is why he forgives them their faults and transforms their sorrow into joy.

This text allows us to understand what is at stake in today's Gospel as it recalls the work of John the Baptist as the herald and the precursor of Jesus. The Gospel starts with a quote from the prophet Isaiah (40: 3) in which God sends a precursor to prepare the way for his anointed one.

In the light of this prophecy, John the Baptist had received the mission of preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of the sins of the people. His message was so powerful and urgent that all the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the different classes composing the society went to him for baptism as a sign of their conversion.

In his message, John recognized his role in the whole process in which he was engaged. He was not the Christ, but only a forerunner destined to announce Jesus. That is why, in his humility he judged himself unworthy of being compared to Christ whose sandals he could not loosen the thongs. He recognized also that his baptism was just through water as a sign of purification, while Christ will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

What do we learn from this Gospel? The first thing we learn is about the importance of the process of preparation. As a matter of fact, when someone is waiting for an important event to happen to him, he prepares seriously. No student will show up for a test without having prepared for it. No searcher of an employment will show up for an interview without having asked himself questions about how he can handle the new job he is asking for. The same is true about a woman who is about to give birth to a child. She will never come to the day of delivery without having prepared things for the baby and for herself.

God wants that we, too, prepare ourselves for this important event of the celebration of Christ's birth at Christmas. What is required is not about material things we have to prepare, like clothes, or a list of questions we have to answer in order to show our

knowledge. It is all about our spiritual preparation in order to create a space in our hearts for Jesus and a Christian serene atmosphere around us.

In that sense, the mountains and valleys symbolize the dirt of our sins and of our bad behaviors from which we have to repent. The baptism of repentance that John was offering symbolizes the purification we need to obtain through the sacrament of confession. We need that purification today more than ever.

It would be an illusion to think that because we did not swear, we did not kill, we did not steal, we did not commit adultery, things are all right. What about the state of our relationship with our spouse, our children, the members of our family or God himself? If we commit to change something of our life and behavior, this coming Christmas will be different from all others we have celebrated up to now. It will bring us peace and Christ's joy.

The second thing we learn is about the importance of humility. In fact, one of the plagues that destroy many people and their relationship with one another is pride. In principle, there is nothing wrong with pride as far as it is the source of our self-esteem and our self-acceptance. However, pride can blind us to the merits of others. It can make us incapable of accepting our limits so that we attribute ourselves an undue glory we do not deserve. Because of that, some people are incapable of accepting their faults and of asking forgiveness when they have messed up things.

By his attitude, John teaches us how humility can be a source of honesty and sincerity. It can help us recognize our real place in the world, as creatures, and the place we have to give to God in our lives, as our creator. Without humility, there is no purification and healing of our relationship with God and our fellows.

These are the things we have to do at this time of Advent in order to come close to our God and prepare a path to Jesus we will be celebrating at Christmas. We have always to remember that we are in the time of the awaiting of the Lord. Because God's time is not human time, we have to be on watch. As St Peter says, the day of the Lord will be like a thief coming without any warning.

We have also to remember that this time of Advent is an opportunity that God gives us to repent and renounce our sins. In that perspective, every day that comes up, and we spend on earth, is a gift God gives us so that we prepare ourselves to his coming. The delay of the return of the Lord is a chance for us who struggle to adjust to Jesus' recommendations. Let us not miss this opportunity of Advent to change our lives and to repent of our sins. May God bless you all!

Isaiah 40: 1-5, 9-11; 2 Peter 3: 8-14; Mark 1: 1-8



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