

Third Sunday of Advent B/2011

The readings of this third Sunday of Advent invite us to joy in the awaiting of the coming of the Lord. This joy has its foundation in God himself, who is the source of our life and who gives us hope for our eternal salvation through the coming of his Son.

In the first reading of the day, the prophet Isaiah describes the joy of the mission he has received from God for the people of Israel now back from exile in Babylon. The nature of the message he bears provokes a great joy for himself and for the city of Jerusalem that is benefiting from God's grace.

In fact, God has anointed him with his spirit in order to bring joy to the poor, healing to the brokenhearted and freedom to the prisoners. In turn, the city of Jerusalem rejoices wholeheartedly because God has clothed it with salvation like a bridegroom spoils the bride with diadem and jewels. By doing so, God makes his justice and praise spring before all the nations like the earth produces plants and the garden the flowers.

As we have learned through the history of salvation, when a prophet speaks it is like in a dream. He does not know the time or the circumstances in which his prophecy will be fulfilled. He does not even know the scope and the extension the prophecy will take.

That is why, when we look at Jesus with this background in mind, we can say that he is the one Isaiah was talking about. In him, the prophecy was plainly fulfilled. In fact, the Father has consecrated Jesus with his Holy Spirit so that he may bring justice to the prisoners, joy to the poor and healing to the afflicted.

In that perspective, the words of St Paul make sense as he invites us to rejoice for what God has done for us in Christ Jesus. As St. Paul himself says, we have to rejoice and to be thankful to God in Jesus Christ. We have to keep his spirit within us and to refrain ourselves from evil. That is the only way God's peace can dwell in us and we can be preserved holy and blameless for the coming of our Lord Jesus.

This call to holiness and blamelessness helps us understand the importance of the Gospel of this third Sunday of Advent as it talks about the testimony that John the Baptist gave about Jesus before the people of Israel.

First of all, John opens his testimony by defining his identity and that of Jesus. He recognized that he was not the Christ, but rather someone sent by God to testify to Jesus, the light of the world. Then, he gave the reason why he was testifying to Jesus, namely so that all might believe in him.

Ordinary Jewish people, the priests and the Levites pressured him and wanted to know why he was baptizing when he was not the Christ or Elijah or one of the prophets. In his candor, he admitted that it was for the sake of forgiveness of sins he was doing. He wanted to make people worthy of the one who was bigger than him and in whom they should believe.

What do we learn from this Gospel? The first thing we learn is about the importance of testimony. When someone is summoned in court as a witness, he is expected to tell the truth so that he helps the judge or the jurors to come to a fair verdict.

When John the Baptist says that he was sent in order to testify to the light, he is inviting us to accept the truth he tells us about Jesus. In fact, Jesus is the light of the world without which we are lost. Like a house without light remains in darkness, so are we if Jesus is not with us and at our side.

Against this background, Advent reminds us that this is a time of letting Jesus enter our homes and our lives in order to brighten them. This is possible only if we let him enter in and not keep him out.

The second thing we learn is about the importance of mediation. In fact, to those who were asking him questions, John said that he came to testify to the light so that all might believe through him. If we understand what is at stake here, it means that John is an instrument that God uses in order to bring salvation to others.

This time of Advent we are invited to the awareness of being God's instruments for the salvation of our fellows. God counts on us in order to reach out to many. As he needs us, will we consent to accept this invitation?

The third thing we learn is about the role of a witness. In fact, as people were asking questions of John, he just said that he was a voice of the one who cries out in the desert and not more. In principle when a voice is heard, it conveys a message. And once a message is given, the voice disappears. This statement teaches us that the most important is not the messenger, but the message he brings. In this case, it is not John who was important, but Christ he was preaching.

As preachers, priests, deacons and catechists, we have an opportunity to rethink this Advent our role with regard to the way we work with the people of God. At the example of John the Baptist, we should never forget that we are just simple preachers and not Jesus himself. If so, it is Jesus we have to preach and not ourselves or our opinions. If we do not make that clear distinction, there is a real danger of pushing people to worship the preacher rather than Christ himself. Another danger is that of pushing the people to fix their eyes upon the messenger rather than on Jesus.

The last thing is about the urgency of recognizing Jesus. It is striking to hear John tell the Jews that someone was in their midst who they did not recognize. That is astonishing for these people who had received the promise of the Messiah. If they had come to that point, the reason is that they held to their behaviors and easy life and did not want to change at all.

Against that background, Advent is an invitation to open our hearts to Jesus and change. We need courage in order to convert and accept the transformation of our lives through the reception of the sacraments, especially that of confession. Let us, then, ask the Lord to enlighten us so that we may see where we have failed in our commitments and come to true conversion. God bless you all!

Isaiah 61: 1-2a, 10-11; 1 Thessalonians 5: 16-24; John 1: 6-8, 19-28



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