

Second Sunday of Advent A/2013

The readings of this second Sunday of Advent talk about the importance of repentance and conversion. They show us the practical way through which we can prepare ourselves for the coming of the Lord. They invite us in particular to the change of life style without which it would be impossible to adequately welcome the Lord in our life.

In the first reading, the prophet Isaiah talks about God's promise to give a new King to the house of Israel. It shows that, unlike those who preceded him, the new king will be gifted with the spirit of God which will give him wisdom, understanding, knowledge and fear of God, etc. It equally shows that because of that power of God on him, his judgments will be just, his decisions right, his faithfulness without failure. The text shows, finally, that because of his governance, peace, reconciliation and harmony will reign between the world of animal, nature and human beings. Therefore, his reign will not be directed only to Israel, but to all the nations of the earth including the gentiles.

What is behind this text is the idea that God's faithfulness toward his people never fails once he has made a promise to them. Another idea is the truth that those who God elects for a particular mission, he also endows with divine gifts so that they accomplish it according to his will. The last idea the text brings is that, in God's plan, the Messiah was destined to bring peace and reconciliation to the world and not only to Israel.

This text allows us to understand the stakes of today's Gospel as John the Baptist prepares the people of Israel for the coming of Jesus the Messiah. First of all, the Gospel starts with the mention of John the Baptist as preaching in the desert of Judea and inviting people to the repentance of their sins because of the imminence of the kingdom of God.

After that, the Gospel describes the food and the clothing of John as peculiar. Because of his message, the whole city of Jerusalem including Judea went to him to receive baptism in the Jordan River.

Then, the Gospel describes the categories of people who went to see John, in mentioning in particular the Pharisees and the Sadducees. It shows also the words John used in exhorting them to repentance. The essence of his words was aiming at reminding them that to be descendants of Abraham does not guarantee salvation if someone does not want to repent of his sins.

Finally, the Gospel gives a self assessment of John's own work and personality with regard to the Messiah. The picture he gives of the Messiah is that of a Judge who is coming in order to pronounce a judgment on the world and who was superior to himself.

What do we learn from this Gospel? Today I want to talk about conversion of heart and repentance of sins. First of all, let me say that the word we usually translate by "conversion" comes from a Greek word called "*metanoia*". Literally, "metanoia" means change, transformation, reform, etc.

In this regard, let me say that life itself is a continual change. For instance as human beings, we develop from childhood to adulthood. This is a substantial change without which a person would have a developmental deficiency. This type of biological change, however, follows its course without necessarily depending on our decision or our will.

Some changes might happen in the life of someone which depend on the individual decision to do so, like in the case of getting married, choosing one career instead of another, moving out of a house or a state for another, buying a new car, etc. Even in the case of events like these, the change is secondary to the essence of a person. Why? Because what makes a human being to be a person does not depend primarily on him being married, or having a new career, or a new car, etc.

This clarification allows us to understand what John the Baptist wants of the Jewish people when he invites to them to repentance. In fact, he is asking them to change deeply in their being by embracing the cause of God without which they cannot have eternal salvation.

That is why when he is asking them to prepare the way of the Lord and to make straight his paths, it has nothing to do with something external to them. On the contrary, it is all about they who have to let themselves be transformed in order to welcome the Lord in their life. As people repair roads and bridges in order to assure transportation and traffic in safety, they have to reform their life and to make it worthy of God.

But, for this type of change to happen, they need to make consciously and intentionally the good decisions to walk with the Lord. They need to bridge the gap between their sayings and doings so that they are unified in mind, spirit and body.

It is for that reason that John insists that they come to understand that the privilege of being descendants of Abraham is not a guarantee for eternal salvation. They have to work out their salvation by responding positively to the Gospel's message. Their roots are certainly good because they are of Abraham's heritage, but this is a time of giving fruits worthy of that heritage.

Now, here is a question? Why are we told such an ancient story? St Paul answers by saying that it is because everything that was written previously was written for our instruction and for our hope for eternal salvation. That is why we have to change deeply in our being or risk losing our eternal salvation. If, for one reason or another, we live in indifference with regard to God's call of changing, we have none else to blame than ourselves. None of us can invoke the spiritual heritage of our family as a guarantee for eternal salvation. Family background may work very well in politics, but it plays very little role when it is about eternal salvation. We have to stand up for our eternal salvation or we will lose it.

This time of ours is a time of personal decision for or against the Lord. This time is a time of accountability and responsibility. This is the appeal of this second Sunday of Advent, namely that we come to change our life, we transform ourselves in our being and doing by creating more space for God in our life and by living up to his standards. May God bless you all!

Isaiah 11: 1-10; Romans 15: 4-9; Matthew 3: 1-12



Homily Date: December 8, 2013

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Contact: www.mbala.org

Document Name: 20131208homily.pdf