

### **Third Sunday of Advent A/2013**

The readings of this third Sunday of Advent talk about the joy of the coming of the Lord. They invite us to trust the Lord, especially when we have hard times. They remind us that the Lord comes in order to console, comfort and heal those wounded by the hardships of life.

The first reading announces a time of consolation and joy for the people of Israel. It shows that things will change completely after so much pain in exile and deportation. It equally shows that with God's help, the land will flourish again, the exiled will return home and the healing will be given to the weak and the sick.

What is behind this text is the idea that God is the consolation of his people. Another idea is that God's consolation brings healing and blessing not only to human beings in their difficulties, but to everything that is related to them, including the land.

This text allows us to understand the stakes of today's Gospel as it presents Jesus as the fulfillment of the messianic hope that Israel awaited for so long. In fact, the Gospel starts with the question of the emissaries of John the Baptist to Jesus, if he was the awaited one or they had to wait for another.

Jesus answered them by referring to the signs he was performing as confirming that he is truly the awaited Messiah. After that, Jesus, in turn, gives testimony to John the Baptist as his precursor and the greatest among women's children. The Gospel finishes with Jesus' statement showing that, though John the Baptist is great, the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

What do we learn from this Gospel? Today I want to talk about the expectation of the Messiah. In fact, in Israel there was a strong conviction that God will not let his people suffer indefinitely without intervening. For that reason, the Jewish people awaited with impatience the coming of the Messiah. And it is in that context that John the Baptist preached the baptism of repentance in preparing the people for the coming of the Messiah.

However, the conception people had about the Messiah varied from one group to another and according to their political or religious vision. For some, the Messiah would be a political figure, like David, who will set Israel free from Roman domination. For others, the Messiah would be a religious figure who will teach the right path to God. In that sense, they saw the Messiah mostly as a judge who will judge the world and who demands 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 when 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 for the train, waiting for the bus or waiting for 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: 1-6a, 10; James 5: 7-10; Matthew 11: 2-11**



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