

Second Sunday of Advent A/2016

The readings of this second Sunday of Advent talk about repentance. They show us that the best way of preparing for the return of the Lord is to repent of our sins. They invite us to change our life style and to believe in the Gospel's message.

The first reading recalls the prophecy of God to Isaiah to give a King to the house of Israel. It shows how the new king will be gifted with the spirit of God that will make him wise, understanding, knowledgeable and fearful of God.

It equally shows how his judgments will be just, his decisions right and his faithfulness without failure. Then, the text shows how under his reign there will be peace, reconciliation and harmony between nature, the animal world, and human beings. Finally, the text shows how his reign will be directed to all the nations and not only to Israel.

What is behind this text is the idea that God's faithfulness and promise toward his people will never fail. Another idea is the truth that God endows with gifts those he chooses to serve his people. The last idea is related to the truth that in God's plan, the Messiah was destined to bring peace and reconciliation to the world.

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 the Messiah. First of all, the Gospel starts with the mention of John the Baptist and his preaching in the desert of Judea and his invitation to the people for the repentance of their sins.

Then, it describes how the food and the clothing of John were peculiar, and how the whole city of Jerusalem, including the people of Judea, went to him to receive baptism in the Jordan River.

After that the Gospel describes the categories of people who went to see John in highlighting in particular the presence of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. It shows also the words he used in exhorting them to repentance, as well as his reminding them that to be descendants of Abraham is not a guarantee for salvation.

Finally, the Gospel gives John's self-assessment of his work and personality in which he shows forth the particularity of his mission and the difference between him and the Messiah.

What do we learn from this Gospel? The appeal of this second Sunday of Advent is repentance of sins and conversion of heart. How is this appeal spelled out? Let me explain by a way of an example. In fact, in the world of sports, there is a vocabulary that is often used, namely "You do not change a team that wins".

In fact, John opens his ministry with the word "Repent". Originally, repentance means change, transformation, and reform. If that is the case, what does John really want his fellowmen to do?

Before answering this question, let me say that life in 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 deficiency. However, this type of biological change follows its course without depending on our decision or our will.

Some changes might happen which depend on the individual decision to do so, like in the case of getting married, choosing a career, moving out of a house or a state, buying a new car, etc. Even in such cases, the change is secondary to the essence of a person, because what makes a human being a person does not depend on him being married, or having a new career, or a new car, etc.

This clarification allows us to understand the essence of John's appeal to his fellowmen. In fact, John wants that his fellowmen 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, that has nothing to do with something external to them. On the contrary, it is about their most inner being that has to 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 says that it is because what 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, then, we are indifferent 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 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



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