

Second Sunday of Advent B/2017

The readings of this second Sunday of Advent talk about the preparation for the return of the Lord. They invite us to a spiritual renewal of heart and change of life in the waiting of the return of the Lord.

The first reading of Isaiah describes the mission of the servant of God sent to comfort the people of Israel in exile. It announces their liberation from exile and the remission of their sins. It invites them to prepare the way for the Lord by working on all the obstacles that can prevent them from welcoming the Lord.

What is behind this text is the idea that whatever might be the suffering of his people, God is able to step in and put an end to it. There is also the idea that where God is involved, a hopeless situation can become a joyful event. The last idea is relative to the truth that God is merciful and forgiving of those who repent.

This text allows us to understand what is at stake in today's Gospel as John the Baptist invites the people to the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The Gospel starts with the mention of the prophecy of Isaiah calling Israel to prepare the way of the Lord. Then, the Gospel describes the ministry of John the Baptist at the river Jordan as proclaiming the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. Finally, the Gospel describes the message of John the Baptist as confessing his unworthiness in comparison to the Messiah who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

What do we learn from today's Gospel? Last week, I highlighted the importance of waiting with patience and vigilance for the return of the Lord. Today, I want to talk about the importance of preparation for the return of the Lord. Let me start with a simple example taken from daily life. In fact, when, for instance, someone is waiting for the result of a medical test, he prepares himself for any possibility that will come his way.

The advantage of preparation here is double. First, it makes one psychologically and mentally ready to accept whichever way the result might turn to be. In concrete terms, it means that the preparation allows the sick person to be well-disposed in spite of the possible change that would come and affect his family, his body, his habits and hobbies.

Second, the preparation can not only allow the individual to accept what is about to happen to him, in his body, but also the risks of becoming another person than what he has been up to now, as well as of living in a way different than what it has been up to now.

This way of considering preparation is important for us today, on this second Sunday of Advent. When John the Baptist is calling Israel to prepare the way of the Lord, by the same token, he is inviting them to accept to become different than what they have been up to now, to consider changing their way of being, living and doing things, to create a space in their hearts for Jesus to come and dwell.

That same message is addressed to us today. In that sense, the making straight of his path means the removal of any hindrance in our life that prevents a good relationship with God and our fellows. We have to repent from those small things that lead us to sin.

That is why as we prepare for Christmas, we do not want to care only for material gifts we are about to give to people, but we want also to care about the state of our relationship with God, our spouse, our children, all the members of our family and our fellows. We want also

to prepare ourselves spiritually. If we can come to change something of our life today, this coming Christmas will be different from all others we have celebrated up to now. It will bring us Christ's peace and joy.

In that sense, the preparation for Christmas is not about commemorating the birth of Jesus, but a concrete preparation that engages us today. As the prophet Isaiah has announced and John the Baptist has demanded, we have to fill in the valley of our hearts, the gaps where we exclude the Lord. We have to level the mountains of barriers and resistance we create to block the entry of Jesus into our life. We must build a bridge in our hearts for Jesus so that through us he might reach out to many others.

Moreover, we have to fill in those holes we have created in our hearts. For some of us, those holes are canyons. Our refusal to forgive those who have hurt us has created a hole in our hearts that has prevented the Lord from coming into our life. We have to level the mountains and hills we have constructed as barriers to love.

Our selfishness in using other people for our own pleasure and satisfaction, our dependency on external things for happiness, our seeking happiness in materialism and consumerism have all become mountains and hills we have to fill in. We must do something for this Advent. Positively, it means that we can fill in the canyons. We can forgive. We can level the mountains. We can remove the barriers to our spiritual growth.

Finally, when John the Baptist confesses the Messiah to be superior to him, he is inviting us to examine our pride and opt for humility. Humility does not mean being crushed by others, but to recognize oneself as a human being like any others, with qualities and defaults. The opposite of humility is pride.

In principle, there is nothing wrong with pride as long as it is a source of self-esteem and self-acceptance. However, pride can blind us to the merits of others. It can make us incapable of accepting our limits so we attribute to ourselves an undue glory we do not deserve. Because of that, some people are incapable of accepting that they are wrong and for that they have to ask forgiveness when they have screwed up.

Let us take advantage of this Advent in repenting of our sins. Let us not forget that the delay of the return of the Lord is a chance for us who struggle to adjust to Jesus' teaching. Let us not miss the opportunity we have today to change our life and welcome Jesus into our life. God bless you all!

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

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