

Third Sunday of Advent A/2019

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

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 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 point of today's Gospel as it presents Jesus as the fulfillment of the messianic hope that Israel awaited for so long. First of all, the Gospel starts with the question of the emissaries of John the Baptist to Jesus, if he was the awaited one or should they wait for another.

Then, it gives the answer of Jesus referring to the signs he was performing and thereby confirming that he is truly the awaited Messiah. After that, the Gospel talks about the testimony Jesus gave about John the Baptist as his precursor as the greatest among the children born of women. The Gospel ends with Jesus' statement showing that, though John the Baptist was 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 putting an end to their plight. For that reason, in the Jewish collective imagination, there was a real mood of waiting for the fulfillment of God's promise through the sending of the Messiah. It is in that context that John the Baptist preached the baptism of repentance as a preparation of the people for the coming of the Messiah.

However, the concept 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 the domination of Romans. 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 condemn the world and demand 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 us something we should never forget, 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 think and say of him. Our speech 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. That is true as we hear in today's Gospel. In fact when the disciples of John questioned Jesus about his identity, he did not say, "Well; I am the Messiah". Rather, he let them see what he was doing so that they determine themselves what he was.

The point is that Jesus will never force anyone to accept him. He will ever respect the freedom of people to come to a decision by themselves after having listened to him. Even if we do not have signs and miracles, as it was in the time of John the Baptist, at least we have the Gospel that contains the words and the actions of Jesus that show us that he is really the Messiah sent by God for our salvation. The Gospel contains the proof of the truth that God sent Jesus, the Messiah, for our salvation.

It is only after the emissaries have seen with their own eyes what God was doing through the hands of the Messiah 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 in his name.

The time of Advent we celebrate is the time when we are reminded that Jesus will come back. We do not know when the moment 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 until nature does its work, so should we keep our patience until Christ comes again.

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 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. May God bless you all!

Isaiah 35: 1-6a, 10; James 5: 7-10; Matthew 11: 2-11



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