

3rd Sunday of Advent (B)
(Isaiah 61:1-2.10-11 / John 1:6-8.19-28)
17.12.2017
Truth about oneself

Who are you? What have you to say about yourself?

These are really challenging questions. How would we answer them? Who am I? What have I to say about myself?

St John the Baptist is hailed by the Church as a martyr for truth because of his death at the hands of Herod. Today in the way he deals with the priests and Levites, how he answers their questions, St John the Baptist reveals himself as a prophet of truth about himself.

Before proclaiming an abstract truth to others or the truth about others, John the Baptist is clear about his own truth, about his identity.

At Christmas we are facing important questions about God's and Jesus' identity: who is this God who reveals himself as a Father and who is this Child born in a manger?

The answers we give to these questions are not neutral because they say something about our own identity. Are we sons and daughters of God? Are we brothers and sisters of Jesus?

Who are we? What do we say about ourselves?

What is striking in our Gospel reading is that everything that is said about John the Baptist, or everything he says about himself, is always connected to Christ. John the Baptist is not self-referential but focused on Christ.

What about us?

When we say who we are, do we include Christ in the answer? When we say something about ourselves, who/what is the tape measure of our own evaluation? Society, ambition, desire to please, longing for acknowledgement or fears of being rejected?

St Paul reminds us that we are supposed to grow into a mature adult with a stature measured by Christ's fullness (Cf. Eph 4:13). So Christ is the tape measure of our lives.

The challenge for us is not to grow in self-importance, self-reliance but to allow Christ to grow in us so that, like St Paul, we may say that Christ is living in us (Cf. Gal 2:20).

Speaking about himself, John the Baptist says that he is "a voice that cries in the wilderness" whose message is a call to be ready for the first coming of the Lord.

In our turn, we are commissioned to foretell the second coming of the Lord. Like John the Baptist we have to prepare the way for the Lord's return. How can we do that?

The starting point for us is, like that of St John the Baptist, it is to be truthful about who we are.

There is need for truth in the way we relate to ourselves, and to others. This truth can be unpleasant and difficult to accept but ultimately it leaves us free to move on, to go further and to grow deeper in all our relationships.

To prepare ourselves for Christmas and for the second coming of the Lord, we must begin by an honest and humble acknowledgement of who we are because it is in our humanity as it is, in our lives as they are that the Lord wants to pitch his tent.

The coming of Christ in the manger of Bethlehem, the birth of the divine Child in the poverty of the crib reminds us that Christ wants to come and dwell within us, and not only in

the clean and nice places that we prepare for him but also in the dark corners of our lives. The Lord wants to visit the places into which we are locked through our weaknesses and flaws. He does not shy away from the failures and disappointments of which we are ashamed and which we prefer to ignore.

In fact, because John the Baptist is a martyr for the truth, he is also a martyr for freedom. We remember Jesus' words: "Truth will make you free" (Jn 8:32). By being truthful about himself, John the Baptist shows us the way to true freedom. By his own life, he "proclaims liberty to captives, freedom to those in prison".

The prison mentioned here is the one we create for ourselves when we cling to a mask, when we are on stage all the time, settling for public persona disconnected from who we truly are.

In the midst of the preparations for Christmas, in a season when we are tempted to ignore our true feelings in order to conform to the general atmosphere, when all around us tells us that if we spend a lot of money we will be happy, it is good that John the Baptist calls us to be truthful.

Among all the gifts that we will give to one another next week, may we not forget that the most important gift we have to give to one another is ourselves in simplicity, generosity and truth.

The other gift which we have to give is the space and the time for others to be themselves. In our families and communities, it is vital to give to others the opportunity to reveal who they truly are, what they feel deep down, without fear and judgement. Let us humbly acknowledge that this exchange of gifts is certainly what many of us long for at a deep level: a place, a time, when we can be really ourselves with somebody else whom we trust.

In his dialogue with the priests and Levites, St John the Baptist is clear about himself, he states clearly: "I am not... I am..." May we be as truthful and simple about who we are, and then we will be able to bear witness to the Light who is coming into the world.