

1st Sunday of Advent (C)
(Jeremiah 33:14-16 / Luke 21:25-28.34-36)
29.11.2015

In today's first reading from the prophet Jeremiah we hear the Lord promise His people that He will make *honesty and integrity flourish in the land*. Because of this, God's People will be able to live in *confidence and trust*.

In the gospel passage proposed for our meditation, alongside the extract from Jeremiah's prophecy, we hear Jesus proclaim to His disciples that their *liberation is at hand*. In light of this conviction they are told to *stand erect* – clearly, not in an attitude of arrogant pride, but, in an attitude of confident trust. Jesus goes on to encourage His listeners to *pray for the strength God gives so that they can stand with confidence before the Son of Man*.

Reading these texts, I found myself thinking of the way St Benedict proposes in his Rule for Monks, which he calls, *a little Rule for beginners*. What Benedict proposes, he states, quite simply and humbly, to be nothing other than *the beginnings of an honest way of life*.

An honest way of life amounts to a path of **integrity**. *The honest way of life* Benedict would have us live, he hopes will lead us to be men and women of *undivided hearts*.

Through the Scripture passages listened to today, I hear the Lord inviting us to **integrity**, to **wholeness**, to **the unification of our being**. This is the call addressed to us as we set out on our annual Advent journey.

Our response to God's call in this respect requires of us that we chose to live humbly. Genuine integrity is always accompanied by true humility of heart.

It is not by our own strength alone that we will ever arrive at the integrity of heart and wholeness to which God calls us and which we desire for ourselves. We will only ever be integral beings by the help of God's grace.

Integrity has been spoken of as *a basic element of Christian character*. Again and again the Bible insists upon its importance.

The grace of an *undivided heart* is a gift from God. The psalmist has us pray imploring the Lord to *unify our hearts*. The Book of Psalms sees integrity as essential in those called to serve the Lord. We are called to serve the Lord our God with *undivided hearts*. Jesus takes this up strongly in His teaching in the gospels.

If integrity is a basic element of Christian character, what exactly is integrity?

Integrity has to do with consistency between a person's inner values and attitudes and their outward declarations and behaviour.

It has to do with consistency between words and actions.

A person of integrity does not say one thing and do another.

A person of integrity does not make empty promises.

Because a person of integrity matches their words with their way of being that person inspires confidence and is found trustworthy.

I think we all know how devastating it is to have been promised something and then to find that what was promised was not delivered.

It is shattering – nothing less than soul-destroying – when we find this happening over and over again in a relationship.

I admit that there will always be occasions when people fail and fall; there will always be times when they cannot deliver what they have promised (it has happened that all of us have failed and fallen in this respect), but when disappointment is a recurring theme in a relationship, then the integrity of the person who continually lets the other down really is questionable.

When we find ourselves on the receiving end of another's constantly recurring disappointment of us, to safeguard our own integrity we are obliged to take an interior distance from that person.

We must be simple and honest enough – at least within our own self – to say that we simply cannot count upon that person. To use an expression of someone I know, we must come to the point where we say to our self that we *just cannot put our shirt on that person*.

That does not amount to completely discounting the other or disrespecting them. Indeed, it is to give them proper respect. It is to be fair to them.

You see, it is not fair to another person to over-estimate them. To overestimate another is not to honour them. In the Biblical sense of the word to *honour* another is to give to that person their proper weight – neither more, nor less.

Understand me, I am not suggesting that we put price-tags on people and/or on relationships.

I say this all the more readily, because integrity and true relationships are never things which are offered on sale.

Genuine integrity, friendship, relationships of trust are never commodities that can be acquired at a price.

At the risk of becoming repetitive, integrity is a gift.

The prophet reminds us this morning that integrity is a gift from God. So too is friendship. So too are all true relationships. (Again this is something the Scriptures teach us.)

I have spoken of integrity being about consistency between words and actions.

When we are dealing with a person of genuine integrity we know what to expect from that person.

The more consistent a person is, the more confidence they will inspire in us.

We trust those whom we perceive and experience to be trustworthy.

In all I am saying, it may sound as if my concern is only about how others are in our regard: whether or not those around us are men and women of integrity.

Be assured, I am not suggesting that it is only about how others are in our regard that we give consideration. It is evident to me that the call of the Scriptures today is for each one of us to give consideration to ourselves, to reflect upon how we situate ourselves in others' regard.

We must ask ourselves whether or not we are men and women who are honest and integral beings.

Our primary concern must always be with our own integrity, our own wholesomeness.

We must seek to be honest in our personal lives, trustworthy in our dealings with others, dependable in our relationships.

I hear the word of God addressed to us this morning as a word which challenges us to be persons in whom there is consistency between the words we speak and the way we live.

Called to be men and women of *undivided hearts*, we must ask ourselves in very practical terms: just how can we develop and maintain integrity in our lives?

To develop and maintain integrity demands of us that we dare to be in-touch with our selves; it demands of us that each one of us be accorded to our true self. Only from this basis can we relate properly to others.

The first skill we need to learn to develop to become integral people is to be committed to deep personal honesty through radical self-confrontation. Enlightened by God's word, and the other insights we are given to help us know and examine ourselves, we must dare to take stock of where we are and how we are in our relationships, at each step along the path of life. The liturgical season of Advent is an appropriate time for an honest self-examination and true self-assessment.

If we are persons of integrity we will not make excuses or blame others for our short-comings. If we are genuinely persons of integrity we will accept and take on board our part of responsibility in each situation and every relationship of our life.

While people of integrity will always take on their part of responsibility in any given situation, they will be vigilant not to take on everybody else's part of responsibility beside their own. While they will, fairly and squarely, accept their responsibility, they will not go beyond it. They will be humble enough to know that they are not responsible for the whole world.

This realisation will actually free them up tremendously. Men and women of integrity know great freedom: they experience the freedom enjoyed by the humble of heart, who live as the children of God.

And so it is that they come to experience that *liberation* of which Jesus speaks to us in today's gospel passage.

To become persons of integrity we need to realise that we cannot live the Christian life depending upon our own strength alone. How important for us to admit and truly accept that we need God's help to enable us to arrive at the unification of our being to which the Lord calls us!

Humble submission to the action of the Holy Spirit in our lives is required of us if we are to be interiorly free.

When we have become integral people, we realise that there is no need for us to pretend to be what we are not.

With a person of integrity you *get what you see*, to use a popular expression. All pretence, arrogance and pride; all play-acting and hypocrisy are gone. There is no place for anything other than authenticity.

People of integrity are trusting enough to allow themselves to be – and to allow others to be – who and what they are, as they are.

During this Advent season may we all be led to grow in integrity. May each one of us be graced to become more fully, more truly, the person God would have us be.

May we be ready to welcome the *liberation that is at hand*, the freedom God desires for us as His beloved children, called to live, each one of us, as *a free person under grace*.