

2nd Sunday of Advent (A)
(Isaiah 11:1-10 / Matthew 3:1-12)
04.12.2016

Traditionally, we spend the Second Sunday of Advent in the company of John the Baptist. We are invited to meet with this great preacher of repentance there where he came first to proclaim his message: *in the wilderness*.

We are told in the gospel passage read this morning how *John the Baptist appeared and preached his message of repentance in the wilderness of Judea*.

Let me suggest that we dare to recognise that this is where the Lord gives us *rendez-vous* today. I hear a call addressed to us, first of all, to recognise, and then, to descend into, the wilderness areas of our own lives. It is in those desolate regions of our being that we are invited to listen to the message of John. It is precisely in the wasteland, the desert of our hearts, that we are called to prepare for the Lord's coming. We are bidden to make a straight path for the Lord as He seeks to gain access to our lives. The One who comes wants to lead us into an experience of fruitfulness. He comes to offer us new life.

The first thing we need to do as we go to meet the Lord, in the void space within ourselves where He gives us *rendez-vous*, is to listen to what John is actually saying. So, let us listen. In fact, John preaches nothing new. The Baptist preaches the centuries' old message of repentance. How often the prophets of ages past proclaimed that message before him. Jesus Himself echoed the same invitation to repent when He began to preach the gospel. He opened his preaching mission with these words *Repent and believe the Good News*. The Church still places this same message at the heart of her gospel preaching today. Across the centuries the message resounds: *Repent*.

There is always a danger when something is repeated often. The danger is to no longer really hear or pay heed to what is being said. Many people dismiss the message of repentance; they discount it, deeming it to be old hat: *I've heard it all before*. Maybe we ourselves fall into the trap of adopting this same attitude at times. Perhaps we've not only heard it all before, but we've actually tried to respond to the repentance call as best we could, never fully succeeding. Frequently our experience flags up for us – rather painfully, it must be said – that we are still no further on. How often we engage ourselves to live certain changes in our lives and yet somehow always manage to fall back in regard to our good resolutions and so fail once again. We can find it extremely hard to remain steadfast in the way of conversion. Our constant setbacks can discourage us greatly. They may even lead us to abandon, or, at the very least, slacken our resolve when it comes to commitment to the way of conversion. We can start to lose hope.

Our lament, born of hopelessness, can become a cry of frustration: *No matter how hard I try to change, it is pointless. I'll always be the same old 'me'. I simply cannot change. There is something fundamentally flawed in me*.

Our constant falls and frequent failures can dishearten and discourage us. So readily we allow, what Saint Augustine calls, our *inner darkness* to speak to us; so easily we take to heart the many disparaging, self-condemnatory words our inner darkness prompts within us. To give credence to these derogatory thoughts only serves to further weaken our already limp response to the Lord's call to conversion.

Mind you, given that we are here this morning for Sunday Eucharist, I imagine that we have not given up hope altogether. No matter how fragile our hope may be – even if it is only hanging on a thread – it must still be there and, while it may be weakened, it is still active...

to some extent at least.

Even though we may have disappointed ourselves over and over again – by our failures to remain engaged in the way of conversion to which the Scriptures constantly call us – the very fact that we are here today manifests some degree of openness to the action of God's grace in our lives.

The invitation of this Sunday is surely a call to revive within our hearts what Charles Péguy calls *little sister hope*.

I hear John's cry *Repent* as an invitation addressed to us to dare to believe that our lives can be turned around, reoriented, so that we may walk in the way of life the Lord would have us follow.

If Advent is the season of hope – and it is – I like to think of this hope as being not only our hope in God, but also an invitation to reconnect with the hope God has placed in each one of us. The Lord holds firm hope in His heart in our regard.

On the day of their monastic Profession all the monks who are here prayed the psalm verse: *Receive me, O Lord, according to Your promise and I shall live. Do not disappoint me in my hope and expectation.* We could all make those words our own each and every day. Some of you who pray with our community regularly will have often heard me formulate a prayer along these lines in conclusion to the intercessions pronounced at our weekday Eucharist: *Lord, may we not disappoint You in the hope and expectation You have placed in each one of us.*

The Lord holds hope in His heart in our regard. No matter how often we may have fallen and may yet fall, God will never give up on us. The Lord will not renounce His hope and expectation that we will come to live the life He so ardently longs to see us enjoy. The Lord's desire for us is that we may live our lives to the full. He wants to see us engaged in the right direction so that we may arrive at that end. He wants to see us follow the path that leads to life in abundance. He certainly does not want to see us choosing to follow ways that detract from or diminish our well-being. So often we follow foolish paths and, in so doing, we connive with death, or, at the very least, we damage our prospects of living our lives in fruitful, truly beneficial, ways.

John the Baptist's message – and this is the message of the Sacred Scriptures in both Old and New Testaments – is that life is before us.

A line from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy comes to mind – a verse which calls us to make a positive decision for the Lord which will be for our own greatest benefit: *See I set before you the way of life, choose life then.*

I said: *Life is before us!* We sometimes hear older people say: *My life is behind me now.* I'm tempted to quip in response to that phrase something an old priest-friend of our community used to exclaim when he wanted to express his disbelief at what we had just said to him: *Is that so?*

Is life really behind us?

If it is, then our life won't have amounted to very much. I'm not saying we won't have lived along the way, but we must always remember that we are called at every step of the way to live even more abundantly.

The life of which the Sacred Scriptures speak is plenitude of being, for it is the very life of God in which we are called to share. It is this which leads me to say that life is not behind us, but before us! We walk towards life. The Lord bids us come: *Come to me that you may live.* I admit that it is sometimes hard for us to see and appreciate this.

As we get older, many of us feel less and less alive. We begin to feel the weight of the many things we have endured along the way: the ills, the aches, the pains we have traversed – not just those which are physical, but also the emotional, psychological and spiritual ills, aches and pains we have had to endure. With the ageing process, we can feel our strength diminished and constantly diminishing. Our taste for life can start to grow stale. We can be up for much less than we once were. There are exceptions to this, of course, but, by and large, growing older can dull people's zest for life. Things are further compounded by the fact that the past is inscribed within us. We carry it in our bodies, in our spirits, in our psyches, in our memories. This can lead us into that terrible temptation I have already referred to: the temptation which would have us say to ourselves: *That's just how things have been and that's just how they are. They will always be the same.* Perhaps – and this is even worse still – a pessimism may have taken root in us. This may have us say to ourselves: *Things will not only never get better; they will only ever get worse. I will never get better; I will only get worse.* There are some who come to a point which has them conclude that life can only be all downhill from now on.

There is a movement within the French Church which likes to counteract that vision by speaking in terms of *la vie montante – life going up!*

It is especially when we are at a low ebb moment that it is good for us to listen afresh to John the Baptist's message – and, indeed, to that of Isaiah before him. The Scriptures heard today would have us look forward and upward. They would have us look forward in hope.

Our first reading points to *a shoot springing from the stock of Jesse* which one day will flower. The prophet draws attention to new life beginning. He speaks of *a scion thrust from its roots*. These images are important. They speak of the new thing the Lord has yet to accomplish. They speak of growth yet to happen – growth that will take time. The shoot and the scion do not become trees overnight.

Advent places us in a posture of hope and expectation. It also reminds us of the importance of waiting in time – watching for *the Lord's hour*, which is often not ours. The notion of *the Lord's hour*, His timing, is one that runs throughout the Bible. We must learn to wait for the Lord and to persevere in waiting. We must wait humbly upon the Lord, remembering that we are not in control. To hold ourselves *in silence and peace as we wait for the Lord to act* is not without its challenges. We are inclined to want everything right now – if not, long before now!

Understand me. If I am calling to patience – advocating that we respect God's timing – I am not suggesting that we adopt an approach which so distances things that we look to the future only in *never never* terms.

Does John the Baptist not speak of the proximity of the kingdom? We have the gospel word: *The kingdom is very near to you.* The Bible speaks of *the Lord coming very soon.* Indeed, it is said: *The Lord's day is already here.* These words are true. *The day of the Lord is at hand. It is already here in your midst.*

Jesus' own proclamation is clear: *Behold, I am with you. The One who is to come* is already here.

He comes to make all things new.

At the very heart of John the Baptist's message is the assurance that the newness heralded by Christ is within our reach. The Baptist speaks of how the Lord's transforming power is already there at work within us.

When John says: *Be changed*, he is inviting us to open our hearts to God's work which is already taking place within us. He is telling us that we can be changed; that we only have to consent to God's grace of conversion which is a gift offered to us. The implications of John's preaching are clear. Our past need not close us into a place from which there is no escape. There is a future for us, no matter what our past has been or our present may be.

Let us look to the future with holy hope alive in our hearts. This holy hope will obtain for us what is ultimately God's gift: true conversion of heart.