

12th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)  
(Zechariah 12:10-11; 13:1 / Luke 9:18-24)  
19.06.2016

The section of the prophecy of Zechariah we have listened to this morning describes a great turning point, a change, a conversion, brought about in the life of God's Chosen People, Israel.

I hear this prophetic word addressed to us today as an invitation for each one of us to allow our lives to be turned around by the Lord.

With this call we are brought back to the very heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Christ opened His mission with a call to conversion: *Repent. Believe the Good News.*

Again and again as we read our way through the gospels we hear Jesus lance the invitation to His listeners to undergo a change of heart and give a new direction to their lives.

It seems to me that we can read in the words the Lord spoke through Zechariah a reassuring message. The prophet reminds us that the conversion to which we are called is best understood as a gift of God's grace. Salvation is offered to us. The Lord's loving kindness is to be received more than it is to be attained. God's mercy is not something we merit. It is graciously bestowed upon us.

The *grace of conversion* does not depend upon the strength of our efforts to bring about change in our lives; it depends simply upon our openness to the Lord's loving kindness.

The place of prayer in the way of conversion is strongly underlined for us in the word of the Lord spoken through Zechariah. Let us listen to the prophet's voice again: *It is the Lord who speaks... Over the House of David and the citizens of Jerusalem I will pour out my spirit of kindness and prayer.*

Zechariah also make it clear that conversion is not just about turning away from our own sin-tainted way of being. Before and above all else, conversion entails turning towards someone. Conversion is about looking to the Lord and recognising in Him the One who is the source of our salvation.

This is the sense I give to these words of the prophet: *They will look on the one whom they have pierced; they will mourn for him as for an only son, and weep for him as people weep for a first-born child.*

When we listen to those words, do we not immediately think of Jesus hanging on the cross? Christian tradition came to see Zechariah's insight as having found fulfilment in the Crucified Christ. We believe Jesus' death on the cross to be the source of that life-renewing, life-restoring grace of conversion to which the gospel of Jesus Christ calls us.

The extract from Zechariah heard this morning reminds us of quite similar passages found in the writings of another great prophetic figure of Israel, Isaiah. Isaiah's *Suffering Servant Songs* immediately come to mind when we hear mention of the one who was pierced. Isaiah spoke of the *Suffering Servant* being *pierced through for our faults*. He saw the death of this just one to be *our ransom* – what sets us free: free to live our lives to the full, as God intended.

All in all, I think it fair to hear both Scripture passages addressed to us this morning to be an invitation to look in the direction of Jesus.

In today's gospel passage, Jesus invites us – not only Peter and the other disciples who stood before him, but each one of us who are here this morning – to look Him in the eye and tell

Him who He is for us.

Given what Jesus shares with His listeners in this same gospel passage about the way of suffering He is called to follow, the invitation to look to Him means that we dare to contemplate Him as our Crucified Saviour. We are called to come to see Jesus' death with the eyes of faith, as the way to true life... not only Christ's true life, but our own as well.

Let us dare to admit to what is flagged up for us when we contemplate the cross of Christ. Is it not true to say that we see there helplessness, vulnerability, suffering, pain and loss made manifest? We contemplate in the flesh of Jesus all these things which are not unknown to us – be that in our own lives or the lives of those near and dear to us.

The cross reveals to us is how our God has espoused our human weakness. In His Only-Begotten Son, Jesus, whom St Paul refers to as *the first-born of many brothers and sisters*, God shows us His compassion, communion and total solidarity with us in our fragile human condition.

The contemplation of the cross which we are invited to live – our looking at the One who was pierced through for us – has for goal to strengthen our hope and to lead us into an ever deeper experience of God's wonderful loving kindness in our regard.

Genuinely understood, contemplation of God's love revealed on Calvary's Hill offers us great comfort in times of affliction. It helps us realise that God is with us in our vulnerability. It leads us to recognise that no matter how battered, wounded and dejected we may sometimes feel, our God is always with us; we are never forsaken, never abandoned, never left alone.

There is something very powerful and liberating about that reassurance, is there not?

I say all this because, at the heart of the spiritual conversion to which we are called, there must be a recognition on our behalf that we are helpless without God's intervention in our favour.

More than that, there must also be an acceptance on our behalf of the free gift of God's cleansing, life-renewing grace.

Zechariah speaks of a *fountain being opened for the House of David*. This *spring of fresh water* – which is referred to by the prophet – speaks to us of cleansing and new birth. It also sends us in the direction of the pierced side of Christ from which poured forth blood and water, two strong symbols of God's life-giving grace.

The call to conversion addressed to us today could be considered as an invitation to experience in a deeper and richer flow of God's own life-energy into our hearts, a call to leave the Lord a freer hand to work in our lives, a call to be open to receive all He wants to offer us by way of loving kindness and tender mercy.

In that fountain of grace opened for the House of David – which we see as pointing us in the direction of Christ's open side – we are called to be bathed in the tide of love that flows towards us.

This is what the Christian life – life with Jesus, life *in Christ* – is all about: being immersed in His love.

All that we have seen so far should show us that the conversion we are called to undergo really is a matter of the heart. According to the teaching of Zechariah – and all the great prophets, right up to and including Christ Himself – what matters is transformation: change from within.

Genuine conversion, complete conversion, will never be the result of our vigorous efforts alone, in the domain of self-imposed disciplines and/or religious observances.

Genuine conversion, total conversion, is something that happens from within. It is the attitude of our hearts that counts. It is not a matter of just doing and saying the right things exteriorly, but of living *in* the right way – it means living *in Christ*. Really living!

Fundamental to the Christian conversion experience is our response to the Lord's call to choose life!

It is only as our minds and hearts are changed – turned towards the One who is life in Himself – that deliverance can occur and freedom be attained.

A true encounter with Jesus leads us to discover that we are set free to live.

It is as our hearts are transformed that our attitudes and actions also change. They begin to accord with God's will for us.

If we work at the level of external changes alone, then our seeming conversion will never hold.

We need to be transformed: changed from the inside out.

Conversion in the light of the gospel depends upon coming to, really entering into, a deeply personal relationship with the person of Christ.

Christ not only turns everything around in our lives, He actually makes *all things new*.

Life with Jesus, life in Christ ... Here we have what amounts to the bottom line of today's gospel passage.

By drawing attention to this end (*life to the full!*), I do not want to detract attention from the passage we must make to attain it. Jesus is clear; He doesn't fudge on this. The attainment of new life, fullness of life, depends upon our daring to die to our old self and all shams in our way of being. We can only come to know true life to the extent that we accept to die to all inauthentic living.

The gospel's message could not be any clearer. Paradoxically, it is through *losing one's life* in a relationship of love with God, through Christ-Jesus, that one is led to find ultimate meaning and true purpose.

The Lord does not want to see any of us settle for anything less than fullness of life. His heart is saddened to see us opt for the sham we so often content ourselves with.

Christ came *that we might have life and have it to the full*.

This is the gift He proposes to each one of us anew this day.

May we welcome that gift wholeheartedly in this Eucharist, wherein the Lord graciously offers us a share in His own life.

*Take and eat, take and drink. This is my flesh and blood ... Receive here my life given for you; the share in my life which is now given to you.*