

2nd Sunday of Advent (C)  
(Baruch 5:1-9 / Luke 3:1-6)  
09.12.2018  
Baptism of Repentance

John the Baptist is not a very attractive figure: his clothing made of camel's hair, his diet of locusts and wild honey (cf. Mt 3:4), his harsh words against the scribes and the Pharisees create the image of an austere and judgemental person that few of us would invite to a family party.

Even his proclamation of "a baptism of repentance" seems to be, at first, a stark reminder of our poverty and sounds like the warning of impending punishment.

Yet this call to repentance for the forgiveness of sins is an amazing message of hope. John the Baptist's proclamation tells us that in our lives, when we turn to God, things can change; we are not for ever stuck in the mud of our sins, mistakes and failures. At Christmas we will rejoice because the Child Jesus is the promise, the hope and the gift that a fresh start is always possible for us.

We have to acknowledge that very often we condemn ourselves to remaining prisoners of our sins, mistakes and failures, we lock ourselves in the gaol of guilt, shame, loneliness and physical or emotional self-harm. We also are quite prompt to lock others up by branding them in such a way that they become unable to move on. Our pride, our desire to be self-reliant and autonomous will always try to keep us focused on what we have done or what has been done to us rather than on what the Lord can do for us.

According to John the Baptist's words, we should never feel trapped by ourselves or by others, either by what we have done or failed to do. Our God is the master of new beginnings. He has been practising this art since the foundation of the world. In his relationship with us, as persons, people and communities, he has always been ready and willing to begin afresh and over and over again.

When we desert or reject him, when we do not listen to his voice and ignore his warnings, "Christ stands before the closed door of (our) grace-resistant hearts and knocks gently with a nail-pierced hand." (M. Volf, *Free of Charge*, p. 205)

Repentance is when we open the door to God's forgiveness and healing power. Repentance is the acknowledgement that we are wounded and sinners, and from this basis it is the experience that God is merciful. The two steps are linked. Before repentance, God is only a word, an abstract idea, he is not yet the God who reveals himself in the excess of his love for us. Repentance is the experience of this love when we need it most, when we could be tempted to despair. Repentance is when we let go of our self-righteousness or our self-loathing and throw ourselves confidently into God's arms and surrender ourselves to the consuming fire of his love.

In 1932, Dietrich Bonhoeffer gave a series of talks on the first chapters of the book of Genesis. He imagined a dialogue between God and Adam. Not permitted to stand alone in his sin, Adam is stopped in his flight by God, who says: "Come out of your hiding place, from your self-reproach, your covering, your secrecy, your self-torment, from your vain remorse (...), do not lose yourself in religious despair, be yourself, Adam where are you? Stand before your Creator." (*Creation and Fall* quoted in A. Kidder, p. 260)

Here, it is important to insist on the fact that repentance is about standing before our Creator and experiencing his healing love. When we return to the Father and repent we do not journey towards a tribunal but towards a field hospital. If behind every sin there is a wound,

then through his proclamation of a baptism of repentance, John the Baptist invites us to present our hearts and minds to God so that he may accomplish his healing work in us.

As part of the healing treatment, the diagnostic may sound like a judgement, the surgeon's knife may be painful and the recovery may be a long and tedious journey, but the whole process is about restoring us to our dignity and full humanity.

We heard in our first reading what the Lord has in mind for us: he wants us "to put on the beauty of his glory". The Lord longs to bring us back "like royal princes carried in glory", back from the land where we hide and wither when we have been hurt by sin and human frailty.

In taking on our humanity at Christmas, God exalts us beyond anything we could have imagined and he opens to us a vista into what is wide and free, but we are tempted to lag behind and hang back and say no. God promises the new creation of all things, but we behave as if everything should remain as it is, as if there is no future, no promise and possibility of change and a fresh start.

During this Advent season, let us allow the Holy Spirit to rekindle in us the desire for a real change in our lives. Let us repent humbly and joyfully, let us open our hearts and minds to God's unconditional and healing love, let us do this out of hope for the future that he has in mind for each one of us.