

3rd Sunday of Advent (B)
(Isaiah 61:1-2. 10-11 / John 1:6-8. 19.28)
13.12.2020

Dear brothers and sisters,

The whole world is fighting against a deadly virus. Europe is dealing with Brexit which is rooted in the spirit of nationalism and goes against the current of solidarity and interconnectedness which prevails in the world today and which is obviously one of the major signs of the times.

In this bleak context, the liturgy invites us to rejoice! We are commanded to rejoice by the first word of the Entrance antiphon of this Eucharist: “Gaudete”, a Latin word which means “rejoice” and which gave its name to the third Sunday of Advent: “Gaudete Sunday”. The order to rejoice is immediately repeated a second time: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice.” You have also noticed that the deep purple colour of the vestments and of the candle of the Advent wreath gives way to the lighter rose colour for this Sunday. New light, the light of Christ is breaking through.

Legitimately we might be tempted to see a contradiction between what we are going through in everyday life and what the liturgy invites us to celebrate, a combat between darkness and light, a clash between sadness and joy. Is there any way whereby we can reconcile these contrasting perspectives? This third Sunday of Advent marks the turning point of the Advent season: we were waiting for the second coming of Christ at the end of time; and now we start to prepare for the celebration of the memorial of the coming of Christ at Christmas. Let us return to the entrance antiphon: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice. Indeed the Lord is near.” If we are called to rejoice, it is because the Lord is coming to be with us and to save us in the mess in which we find ourselves. The perspective of the coming of the Lord in our midst gives us hope and joy... We are no longer alone. Christ is with us, the victorious Christ, the one who has conquered sin and death and who has promised us a share in his victory.

In today’s gospel, John the Baptist invites us to “make a straight way for the coming of the Lord” in our hearts and in the world. Another well known translation says: “Prepare a way for the Lord. Make his paths straight”. What does it mean to prepare a way for the Lord?

The first reading from the Prophet Isaiah speaks of the transformation that the Messiah will bring about, the change the coming of Christ will bring. We are invited to progressively enter into this wonderful perspective: “The Lord has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to bind up hearts that are broken; to proclaim liberty to captives, freedom to those in prison; to proclaim a year of favour from the Lord”. If we want to prepare a way for the Lord, if we want to prepare our hearts and minds to welcome Jesus who comes, we have to enter on the path described by Isaiah.

Mention of “the year of favour” from the Lord is a clear allusion to the Year of Jubilee which is spoken of in chapter 25 of the book of Leviticus. This jubilee year is a time in which debts are forgiven, those in servitude are set free, land taken in pledge is returned, and peace and justice are restored.

To prepare the way of the Lord in our hearts and minds is to set others free. It is to renounce to our quest to control others; it is to choose to serve others, to help them grow and become who they are. It is to renounce to use of or even abuse of others; it is to choose to respect them. It is to renounce to ignorance or disdain of others and instead to give them the right to exist as they are. We have to set free not only human beings, but also the whole creation: nature and all living creatures. The whole creation has to be respected and protected, rather than pillaged and exploited, duly honoured because everybody and everything was created by God. The whole of creation speaks to us of the love of the Creator of all things.

To prepare the way of the Lord is to set ourselves free from all that enslaves us: from our addictions of every kind: food, drink, drugs, sex, gambling... and even our increasing enslavement to those electronic devices which are so useful, but which can so easily become an idol, a god which paralyzes us and hinders us from being fully alive.

To prepare the way of the Lord is paradoxically to set God free to be God in our lives, to allow God to be the living God, the God of surprises, and not a fossilized idol, a lifeless idol.

At Christmas, Jesus will come to set us free. But He cannot do that without our collaboration. When we set others free or set ourselves free, it is already Jesus who has come and is leading us into liberty, true freedom of heart.

Let us prepare a way for the Lord both within us and all around us. He is coming very soon. This is the source of our joy. Whatever the situation of our life may be, the Lord is coming to be with us, to help us, to save us. Whatever the situation of our life may be, there is hope! So the liturgy is right when it invites us to rejoice, even if a lot of things around us look rather bleak. "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice. Indeed the Lord is near. Amen.