

2ada,2016

Advent is a season of waiting. But who are we waiting for? Baby Jesus seems like the obvious and most popular choice. But the Opening prayer of the first Sunday of Advent asks the Father to make us ready to “run forth to meet your Christ with righteous deeds AT HIS COMING— AND THAT SOUNDS LIKE WE’RE WAITING FOR Christ’s coming at the end of time. But there is a third layer. We never stop remembering that Jesus is always among us in Word and Eucharist and in the hearts of faithful believers. This paradox of Jesus Christ—who was, who is and who is to come-- is at the heart of our Advent spirituality, as Msgr. Mayo referred to last weekend. St. Bernard of Clairvaux named this “The three Comings of the Lord.” The first coming occurred at the nativity; the second coming occurs in the here and now; the third coming will occur at the end of time, when Christ returns in his glory.

For further understand, it would be helpful if look at the powerful passage from Isaiah in today’s First Reading. It is in two parts:

- a. To begin with, there is a picture of the perfect King. He is a descendant of Jesse, who was the Father of King David and through St. Joseph, an ancestor of Jesus. Jesus is full of the Spirit of God and enjoys the special gifts of the Spirit. And so when Jesus is baptized, we will see that Spirit coming down on him in all of its fullness.
- b. The second part is a picture of the age that this King will inaugurate. It is a regime of justice and peace. This is the ultimate goal of the Reign of God, a goal we have not yet realized, but which, with the help of our King, we have great hope of reaching.

This weekend we read about this reign of God in the context of Advent and Christmas. There is a real challenge for us to identify with this program in word and action. Strange, and as challenging as it may seem, God expects our co-operation in bringing about of His kingdom of peace and justice.

Certainly John the Baptist was a great figure in his own right and a true prophet in the Jewish tradition. A great prophet yes, but not necessarily the type of man that any Father here would hope that his daughter would want to marry. And yet we do know that John had a large following-- disciples in the hundreds if not thousands--came out into the desert to hear him speak. He performed a ritual in water by which people expressed sorrow for their sinful lives and promised to turn back to God. A ritual that eventually involved into what we now call a sacramental baptism.

In some ways, the role of John was not unlike that of Jesus, yet, in other ways, it is very different.

Like Jesus, John preached a message of repentance. "Repentance" here, as elsewhere in the New Testament, is translated from the Greek word metanoia. However repentance is so much more than just being sorry for our past sins. It involves a deep and radical change in one's thinking and behavior. As a result, "radical conversion" would be a much better rendering of metanoia than the word repentance.

And like Jesus, John will be rejected, persecuted, "handed over" and finally executed for his courageous defense of truth and justice.

But there are also clear differences between John and Jesus. This was not, in small part, to their lifestyles. John lived a severely ascetical life as a hermit in the desert. People came out to him; he did not go to them. Jesus, on the other hand, is seen as a socializer living mainly in

3

cities and towns. He goes out of his way to mix with all kinds: rich and poor, religious and secular, good and the bad. Nor does he hesitate to enjoy the hospitality of their homes. He was totally in contact with the world, but not tainted or influenced by the world's weaknesses.

As a truly humble man, John emphasizes that Jesus completely outranks him and that he is not worthy to even untie Jesus' sandals. He is simply preparing the way for the Messiah, the Christ, the Savior King.

John's baptism was an individual expression of a desire to come back from sin to God, to return to a faithful following of the Law. The baptism of Jesus, on the other hand, comes with the "Holy Spirit and fire." It inaugurates a special relationship with Jesus, through which the baptized person becomes incorporated in the very Body of Christ, becomes, as it were, a very extension Christ himself.

Two kinds of people were coming out to see John. There were ordinary people, genuine penitents, looking for reconciliation with God. And then there were the Pharisees and Sadducees who came out, not to express sorrow for their sins, but to test John's orthodoxy and observance of the Law.

John has little time for them. He sees them just as much in need of radical conversion as anyone else; he believed that their salvation was not assured simply because they are descendants of Abraham. After all, it is not birth, race, religious affiliation, education, social status or financial clout that makes us friends of God, but we become friends of God by our belief that salvation only comes to those who give themselves into God's hands and makes God's will their own.

No one is saved simply by being a Law-abiding Jew, as the Pharisees seemed to think, any more than being baptized in a Christian Church alone brings us salvation. Much more is expected. Jesus later on will



say that those who presume that they are God's people, but without the actions to prove it, will have to give way to tax collectors and prostitutes, who, because they reformed, will gain entrance into the Kingdom. When it comes to us Christians, so many of us fall into the trap of cruise-control. Maybe we haven't crashed in our spiritual journey, but is that any way to go through life, by just being satisfied that we haven't yet been involved in a really big crash?

Matthew's gospel, however, is not just lashing out at those Jewish leaders. The words of John the Baptist today are primarily directed to ourselves, to the Pharisee and Sadducee in each one of us. Our most dangerous enemy is complacency: I'm a good enough Catholic. I'm not perfect, but I keep the basics of my religion. But let truth be told where our relationship with God is concerned, to stay in the same place, is to move away from God.

If we have a casual attitude to the demands of our faith, we may look on Advent and Christmas as merely memories of past historical events. But Advent also means "coming" and, if this season is to be meaningful, there has to be a genuine coming of Jesus into our lives both as individuals and as community. It is a time to rid ourselves of all that is not Christ and it is a time to remind ourselves of our constant need for a radical conversion towards our God.

If John the Baptist were to come among us today, what would he tell us? What would he warn us against? As we come to the end of another calendar year (and the beginning of the Church year), where do we need conversion and change in our lives? How can we and our families' live better witness to the Christian message. The problem with heeding JB's call to repentance, if the truth be known, is that often we simply do not want to change because change involves risks. It's so much easier to stay as we are; to stay in whatever routines, ruts that

5

we've created for ourselves. It is so much easier to seek the safety of anonymity.

I include myself in the following question: I wonder how many of us would be here in this church today if somehow our lives were threatened by simply being here?

And so I ask myself: how seriously do I take the call to worship? But let's drop this question down a few notches and ask ourselves: how seriously do I take Jesus' invitation to partake of His Body and Blood?

And so are we here worshipping when the skiing is good; when the weather is perfect for a family hike? When football is on at the same time? We can easily find excuses for all of our actions. We must know that, the celebration of Advent calls for a serious consideration of these questions.

We are probably well into preparations for the celebration Christmas. But what preparations have we made for the time afterwards, for the year that is ahead? Will Jesus be really part of my life in any new and significant manner? Are his concerns my concerns? Do I have any intention of giving him the gift of Metanoia, the gift of my radical conversion?

"Peace on earth and good will to all" needs not to be just a song of the angels, but a program for you and me to bring about.