

Second Sunday of Advent

Today's First Reading consists of the opening words of what many consider the most beautiful book of the Old Testament: the Book of Consolation, found as chapters 40 to 55 in the scroll of Isaiah. To appreciate the reading we need to know that it is composed by a 'School' of prophet-preachers towards the end of the exile in Babylon. They write in the style of the temple singers who are responsible for the psalms. Judah had been laid waste by the Babylonian army and Jerusalem and the temple destroyed. All the leading citizens had been forcibly deported. The authors composed their work at a time when the Babylonian armies were in full retreat before the Persian invaders under Cyrus. The Persians had already acquired a reputation for allowing refugees to return to their own countries and so the prophet-preachers, seeing the hand of God in the Persian victories, are holding out hope for the exiles that God will soon welcome them back to Jerusalem.

They see their generation as reliving the experience of their ancestors who escaped from Egypt. They, too, will cross the desert and once again enter the Promised Land. God is even now preparing the way for their return and will guide them himself as a shepherd guides his sheep. He will 'gather the lambs in his arms, holding them against his breast and leading to their rest the mother ewes.'

The Church offers us this reading, so that in this season of Advent we will be encouraged to undertake a journey ourselves – a journey home. If we find that we have strayed away from our faith community, too busy to share our faith and too busy to seek the special presence of Jesus that comes in the sacrament of communion, we are invited to listen to the longing in our heart and return home. If we find that we are exiled from our own heart, that meeting our obligations and trying to please everyone and cope with the daily demands on our time and energy, we have neglected spending time in prayer, that we will remember what it was like to be at home in our own soul and will resolve to honour ourselves and allow God the time and space to love us. I am reminded of the following appeal from Saint Augustine:

'Return to the heart! Why are you running away from yourselves? Why are you getting lost, outside yourselves, entering on deserted ways? You are wandering aimlessly. Come back! To where? To the Lord! It can be done without delay! Return immediately to your heart! Exiled from your own self you wander outside. You fail to know yourself, you who want to know the source of your existence. Come back! Return to the heart ... See there what you can learn about God, for the image of God is there. In your inmost being dwells Christ. In your inmost being you are being renewed after God's image'(Tractate on John 18.10.1).

Perhaps we feel a general unease, but are not sure what to do to get our life in order. A little further on the same Book of Consolation, the authors have God say: 'I will lead the blind by a road they do not know, by paths they have not known I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground. These are the things I will do, and I will not forsake them'(Isaiah 42:16).

Let us turn to God in prayer and pray to be open to God's surprise, for God has not stopped calling us even when we have failed to call on God: 'I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, "Here I am, here I am," to a nation

that did not call on my name'(Isaiah 65:1).

The Responsorial Psalm reminds us that 'God will speak words of peace to those who turn to him in their hearts'(Psalm 85:8). We have nothing to fear when we turn to God, for no one loves us with a more delicate love than the one who holds us in existence and longs for us to live and to live to the full. Yes, we will have to live our real lives. We will have to stop pretending, or running, or trying to escape. We will have to stop rushing around on the surface of things and we will have to dare to enter deeply into our own hearts and into the hearts of those who are part of our lives. But isn't this what we want to do? It is sometimes painful to face the truth, but it is never a waste of time and, as Jesus says, it is the truth that sets us free. The Psalmist goes on to reassure us that our 'salvation is at hand.' The Church is thinking of Jesus, whose birth we are preparing to celebrate. The name 'Jesus' means 'Saviour'. If we are looking for meaning, all we have to do is look into his eyes and we will find it, for he looks on us with love and offers to heal us, to forgive us and to share with us his special communion with God.

In the Second Reading, Peter uses traditional imagery to evoke the end of history. He is not attempting a detailed description of what will happen. He is simply reminding his readers that the world and the life we know is passing and that we are created for a communion with God beyond death. He does not want us to waste our lives and find ourselves unprepared when the time of our own death comes. Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan, Archbishop of Saigon, spent his final years in exile in Rome. In his small book 'Five loaves and two fish' he reflects on the many years which he spent in solitary confinement and in enforced detention and hard labour. What helped him through was his decision to live each moment as though it was his last, and to focus on filling every moment to the brim with love. This fits well with Peter's advice to us today.

The Gospel is the beginning of Mark's Gospel in which he sees John the Baptist as carrying on the call of the prophet-preachers of the exile. He, too, is reminding his contemporaries to prepare for the coming of God who is to lead them across the desert, not from slavery in Egypt or exile in Babylon, but from the slavery of sin which causes us to be exiles from our own heart and from communion with God. John is quoting from the Isaiah scroll to remind us that we are not alone. God is constantly sending angels to guide us as we prepare the way. And the way is to open our hearts to welcome the coming of Jesus, and also to listen to him as he inspires us to walk with him, and to take the good news out to others. The Baptist is pointing the way to Jesus, for in listening to Jesus we are listening to God's word, and in looking on Jesus we are seeing the face of God. The Church is inviting us to relive this experience, knowing that God wants to visit us again this Christmas with the perfect gift – the gift of his Son coming into our hearts and into our homes to share with us the Spirit of love, the love that is his personal communion with the God he calls 'Abba! Father'. Jesus invites each one of us: 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls'(Matthew 11:28-29).

We are invited to ask ourselves: What changes must I make in my life if I am going to respond to Jesus' call? What do I have to do differently? Are there ways of behaving that I have to leave behind? Do I have habits of self-gratification that keep distracting me from what I most desire; that get in the way of important loves in my life; that trip me up and distract me? We could well heed the maxim: 'carpe diem'('seize the day') – not in order to get maximum satisfaction but in

order to draw on the grace that God is offering us so that we will harness all our energies of love and do our part in carrying on the mission of Jesus, to build a 'civilisation of love.'