

Second Sunday of Advent, Year A

In today's First Reading Isaiah is caught up in a vision in which he sees an end to all war and strife. His words issue from his prayer, and speaking for God he declares: 'They do no hurt, no harm, on all my holy mountain, for the country is filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters swell the sea'(Isaiah 11:9). How we would all want such a dream to come true! For Isaiah it was more than a dream. It was a promise coming from God whose love will never fail his world. However, for the dream to come true, we have to allow God's love to change our hearts and minds and ways of behaving. This is what we mean by repentance and it is the central theme of today's Mass.

The Responsorial Psalm speaks of God saving the poor and helpless when they cry. But for this to happen the king of Judah must remember that the poor belong to God and that he must exercise the justice of God in their regard. Psalm 72 is about good government, and people in positions of power (and aren't we all in such a position in various ways?) could do well to meditate upon its words. However, it does not apply only to those in positions of power. For lasting peace to come to our world, all of us, whatever our way of life, need to be open to God's love and to allow it to change our ways of thinking and behaving.

The Second Reading from Paul offers us the example of saintly men and women from the history of Israel, and sums up the attitude we should have in the following simple but beautiful words: 'It is to God's glory for you to treat each other in the same friendly way as Christ treated you'(Romans 15:7). Simple words, but very beautiful when we think of the gracious way in which Jesus reached out to the poor, the marginalised, the broken and the lost of this world. Imagine what the world would be like if we each reached out in love the way Jesus did! To learn to do this we need to repent.

Today's Gospel focuses on John the Baptist. He is dressed like Elijah, the ancient prophet who was said to be 'like fire' and 'whose word burned like a torch'(Sirach 48:1). Matthew sums up the preaching of John the Baptist with a call to repentance: 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand'(Matthew 3:2). He sums up the preaching of Jesus in exactly the same way (Matthew 4:17), and this is the message that Jesus gives to his apostles who are to join him in his mission (Matthew 10:7). Repentance is at the very heart of the Gospel.

To repent means to open our minds and hearts to see things in a different way. First of all it means to see God in a different way – as the Father revealed by Jesus, the Father who loves, who forgives, who wants to heal and release, and enable everyone without exception to love the way we are meant to love. If we see God in this way we will look at ourselves and others differently, and we will learn to 'treat each other in the same friendly way as Christ treated you'(Romans 15:7). We find this call to repentance right through the prophets. Isaiah challenges us: 'Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice'(Isaiah 1:16-17).

However, repentance - that is to say, changing our way of thinking and behaving by attending to what God is doing in our world and in our hearts – is not something we can do on our own. The prophet Ezekiel knew this and God speaks through him when he writes: 'I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be cleansed from all your impurity, and from all your idols I will

cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh'(Ezekiel 36:25-26).

John the Baptist knew this too and so he promises his contemporaries that someone more powerful than himself (he is speaking of Jesus) is going to come and baptise them with the Holy Spirit and fire. Jesus is going to come and love them so powerfully that they will be unable to resist the attraction of God's love, and the dreams and hopes of all the prophets will be fulfilled. Things did not work out as John the Baptist hoped. People were capable of resisting even Jesus. And this is still true today, as we experience only too well. And so as we re-enact his birth, we are invited and challenged to open our hearts to him and to let him really change us from within. Each liturgical season has its special grace. The grace of Advent is to prepare us for the special coming of Jesus to us and to the world at Christmas. Since the kingdom of heaven is once again near at hand, you and I today are invited to repent.

How often, just like the people in today's Gospel, we find ourselves struggling to find direction in a 'wilderness'. Tracks that we once followed now seem to go nowhere or are swept away, and we find ourselves in a trackless waste. Loves that once sustained us have proved fickle and have gone. Worst of all, our own sins return to haunt us and we are faced with our powerlessness to find direction and freedom. This happens to us personally. It happens to those we love and to communities that are significant to us. Matthew is inviting us to not lose hope but to realise that the desert - my desert - can also be the place where I can find new life and where a new creation can begin. The prophet Hosea understood this. God, speaking through him, says: 'I will now allure you, and bring you into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to you'(Hosea 2:14). Admitting, naming and 'confessing our sins', like the people of Judah, we too can prepare to encounter the one who is stronger than we are, the power and gentleness of whose Spirit can speak tenderly to us and call us to journey with him to a deeper meaning and a fuller freedom.

Jesus was intimately connected with the history and the hopes of his own people. Saint Paul says: 'In him every one of God's promises is a Yes'(2Corinthians 1:20). If Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises made to Israel, he is also the fulfillment of the promises made to any and every people. This was Paul's belief and Matthew shares it. What, then, about the promises which God has made to us, personally and through the history of the people from whom we come? What about the promise made us when God imagined us into life with those unique and unrepeatable qualities that are ours; the promises made whenever anyone has responded to God's inspiration by mediating God's love to us; the promises that are made to us as the gift of life opens up for us with every new day; the promises made to our world? For all the insufferable pain he experienced during the destruction of Jerusalem, the author of the Book of Lamentations could still write: 'The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him." The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him'(3:22-25).

The one to whom we look for forgiveness and healing, the one to whom we look to find direction when we have lost our way, is the one whom our souls recognise. We are made for God and Jesus attracts us because in his person he fills our senses with the perfume (the 'chrism') of God. We can share his life and his grace, and become, as Paul says, 'the aroma of Christ to God' (2Corinthians 2:15); but only when we have allowed Jesus to baptise us with his

Spirit.

Are we ready for the change of mind and heart that this will require? Are we ready for the surprising nature of the good news that he will bring to our lives? Do we dare to believe that the news is, indeed, 'good'? Can we dare the desert journey? The sacrament of reconciliation is always available to us. It has a special place in Advent. May the welcome we give Jesus this Christmas be like that of Mary and Joseph, and as pure. May our hearts be 'filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters swell the sea'(Isaiah 11:9). Then we can add to the grace that floods our world and contribute to its peace.