

## THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

*Gospel: Matthew 11:2-11*

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John : "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

### REFLECTION 1:

### REJOICE!

This third Sunday in Advent is traditionally called Gaudete Sunday, which means 'Rejoice Sunday'. It takes its name from the first word of the Latin antiphon of the mass, 'gaudete' which means 'rejoice'. In this antiphon the church invites us to 'Rejoice in the Lord always'. We rejoice in the Lord today as we remember his first coming into the world, over 2,000 years ago as well as his on-going presence among us.

Victor Frankl was a Jewish psychiatrist and when the Nazis took over Germany he was arrested along with other Jews and sent to Auschwitz Concentration Camp. Surprisingly he afterwards recorded his experiences saying that their greatest sufferings were those of waiting: waiting to learn what happened to loved ones, waiting to learn one's own fate, waiting to be gassed, waiting to be rescued. This waiting affected prisoners in different ways. Some lost hope and despaired while others lost faith and stopped believing. But others continued to wait and pray. They never lost hope, never lost faith. What was true of Jews in Nazi Germany was also true of Jews in ancient Palestine. They too suffered from political oppression – the pain of waiting: waiting for the coming of the Messiah, The Promised One, and the King about whom the prophets foretold.

Now the clouds of uncertainty are lifted when a man clothed in hermit's garments, John the Baptist, emerges from the desert announcing the arrival of the Messiah. He points to 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world'. John now imprisoned by Herod for denouncing him for his adulterous life. While in prison John had heard of the missionary activity of Jesus in which love, mercy and understanding for sinners prevailed. This merciful and loving approach did not quite fit in with the 'fire and judgement' aspect of the Messiah's mission that John had advocated. And so he is now wondering if Jesus really is the Messiah. To resolve his doubts he sends a delegation to Jesus to ask; are you the Messiah, the promised one? Luke adds that Jesus worked miracles in the presence of John's delegates as proof that he is the true Messiah, fulfilling the prophecies. Jesus' gentleness towards all, his compassion and even friendship for sinners, his emphasis on mercy rather than justice, caused scandal, not only to the Pharisees but also even to some of his close followers. Jesus praises John the Baptist, a man of principal, fearlessly speaking in defence of truth. He was the greatest and closest to God of all the prophets, 'no greater born of woman'.

I believe that this doubt of faith that assailed John about the coming of the Messiah in the person of Jesus Christ indicates to us that faith is something very fragile. The fact that the Baptist, the fearless desert preacher had second thoughts about Jesus, wondering if he is or isn't the Messiah. There will be people at mass this weekend who have heard this Gospel and who likewise have experienced a crisis of faith, a dark night of the soul. When these times come, we can be confident that God will reach out a very supportive hand as he did for his Son in his darkest hours in Gethsemane and to countless others through the ages. May we avail of these grace-filled days and the Feast that follows to nourish our faith in our closeness to Jesus.

## **REFLECTION 2: HEALER OF OUR BROKENNESS**

What is heaven like? At one time or other, most of us have asked that question. Our hopes about heaven vary depending upon our age and life experiences. For some, heaven promises an end to pain and struggle; for others, it holds out the hope of reuniting with loved ones. During Advent, we might phrase it like this; 'what will it be like to meet the returning Jesus - how will I experience the salvation he brings?'

For those who lived in the days of Isaiah, James and Matthew (Today's Readings) their thoughts would have focused on the Messiah. But for others whose history had been shaped by foreign oppression from Assyria, Babylonia, Persia and then Rome, their hopes of a Messiah were markedly political, characterised by a battle for freedom, for civil rights, for land, for political power and economic stability. We had a taste of this even among Christ's own disciples after his Ascension, musing over a Messiah who might route Roman rule from Israel.

There were some among the people, however, who saw beyond the battlefield and whose hopes were open to the surprises God has in store for the faithful. The God they had envisaged was the God who would take up the cause of those stripped of all power - that God ceases to be the support for destructive powers and becomes the God of the poor. God is still clad in the trappings of a king, not to impose a new imperialism but to establish justice, healing, freedom and peace.

This kind of Messiah is the one reflected by Isaiah in today's First Reading and repeated in today's Gospel (Isa. 35: 1-6, Matt 11 2-11). Then, the eyes of the blind would be opened, the clearing of deaf ears, the lame leaping like stags and the singing of the mute. This would also be food for the hungry, justice for the oppressed, protection for strangers, freedom for captives and the raising up of all who are bowed down (Psalm 146).

The salvation Jesus came to realise in terms of the poor, the weak, the hungry, the oppressed, the displaced and the marginalised has now become the mission of the church, our mission - 'He has no hands but ours', St. Teresa of Avila would say. For the church to spend its energies and resources on endeavours that do not bring about this quality of salvation is to work at cross-purposes to the One whom we await. If we are answering the needs of the homeless, the hungry and if victims of injustice find in us a voice that speaks to them - then we are beginning to make authentic preparations to welcome Jesus, Saviour of the world. Such was the witness Jesus gave and the face that he as Saviour reflected to all whom he met. Is this the face with which we prepare to welcome Jesus?