

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Gospel: Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

REFLECTION 1:

REPENT!

Some years ago a man was shocked to read his own obituary in the morning paper. His death was mistakenly reported. But what shocked him most was how the obituary described him as someone who devoted his life to making weapons of war. That morning he resolved to turn his energies in a new direction, working for world peace and human betterment. That man was Alfred Nobel, founder of the Nobel Peace Prize. John the Baptist's warning to us to turn from our sins and Alfred Nobel's decision to turn his energies in a new direction, challenge us to also turn away from our sins because the Kingdom of God is near. Jesus poses the question: 'Will a person gain anything if he/she wins the whole world but is himself/herself lost or defeated?' (Luke 9:25).

About 30 years previous to the event described in today's Gospel (Matt 3: 12) an angel described to Zechariah, a priest of the temple, that he would have a son (even though his wife Elizabeth was barren and advanced in years). This son was destined to be the Herald/Precursor who would announce the arrival of the long-expected Messiah. John, the name given him by the angel even before his conception, spent his youth and early manhood as a hermit in the desert of Judea, preparing himself for exalted office. When God made known to him that the Messiah was soon to begin his public life, John set out for the bank of the Jordan, where he began to preach repentance, in order to prepare the people for, as he put it, 'him who was to come'. John quotes a text from the prophet Isaiah in which the prophet is telling the Jews to prepare a royal road through the desert for the future Messiah King. John was dressed as a hermit and ate as a hermit, yet people flocked to him. He baptized them but this was not the sacrament of baptism later instituted by Christ, but rather a symbolic washing to indicate repentance and the resolution to avoid ungodliness. Pharisees and Sadducees, the two religious groups of Jews at that time, also came for baptism. They were a boastful lot, proud and full of intrigue, so John did not mince his words when addressing them, calling them a brood of vipers. He warned them that descent from Abraham and membership of the Chosen Race would not save them unless they truly repented. God, he warned them, would find a new Chosen People, which in fact he did.

John is humble, he realises he is only the Precursor. His baptism has no effective power; it's value coming from the personal repentance of those who received it. But the one he is preparing for will truly cleanse from sins and give the Spirit of God to those who accept him. John feels that he is not worthy to be even a menial servant of this Messiah. This Messiah, whom we know as Jesus Christ, will separate the wheat from the chaff, the good from the bad and each will be in receipt of what he/she deserves. Please God none of us deserves the reproach John addressed to the Pharisees and Sadducees, but most of us can find traces of unwholesomeness within our inmost selves. The pride and self-righteousness of the Pharisees ruined their otherwise decent lives, while the worldliness of the Sadducees made them lose interest and deny an afterlife. A sincere reflection on our outlook, our way of life, will tell us how we stand in relation to Jesus Christ, turning what was chaff into wheat.

REFLECTION 2: JOHN'S JUSTICE MEETS MERCY OF JESUS

John the Baptist is one of those people you pay attention to. He's not gentle like Jesus or persuasive like Paul - in fact he's a holy terror! His body is gaunt from fasting and his eyes are sharpened by the visions he has seen. You get the feeling that when he speaks, he is talking straight at you and that he means every word he utters.

John was no man to trifle with. He had already had a huge following before Jesus made his first contacts in public life. People flocked from miles around to hear his messages and receive his baptism. John knew what he wanted, and he was determined to get it - no identity crisis here, he cut straight to the point. Some even swore he was the messiah and just 30 years into the first millennium, John, not Jesus, was the man to watch.

Recall when John and Jesus first met. John was at the River Jordan calling sinners to repentance in no uncertain terms. Jesus had not yet begun preaching, but now he judged the time to be right, so he queued up to be baptised along with sinners. When John and Jesus came face to face, the sinless one seeking baptism from God's rottweiler, John didn't know what to expect. At first John hesitates, but Jesus insists and it is done. God confirms their decisions: 'John, this is my Son', 'Jesus, I am pleased with you'.

Their lives next meet through messengers. John has been imprisoned by Herod, for denouncing his adulterous relationship with Herodias, his brother Phillip's wife. As he muses over his fate, he wonders why Jesus is acting so strangely, associating with the very sinners he was trying to scare into salvation. So, John sends messengers to ask Jesus, 'Are you really the one we have been waiting for?' Jesus had a way with words. He told the messengers: 'Tell John that my call comes from the same book as his. I am only doing what it says in the Book of Isaiah: curing the sick and preaching good news to the poor'.

The last recorded connection comes when Jesus is informed of John's death. Jesus knew then that he had to declare himself. He said 'Tell that fox Herod that he killed the wrong man; I am the messiah'. Jesus now steps onto centre stage, while the greatest prophet who ever lived faded into the background.

The Baptist's life is tragedy from conception to execution. He ended his days in prison; he had pitted his strength against the cunning fox and was slaughtered. He was like a classic tragic hero fated to do the right thing at precisely the wrong time - his life in a sense, a useless passion.

Or was it? God writes straight with crooked lines. John played his role to perfection. He convicted humankind of evil, so leaving God to send us his mercy in the person of Jesus Christ.