

8th December 2019 (Second Sunday in Advent, Year A)

Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 71(72):1-2,7-8,12-13,17; Romans 15:4-9; Matthew 3:1-12.

'Prepare a way for the Lord, make his paths straight.'

The first reading, from the book of the Prophet Isaiah, and the gospel reading, both speak of new beginnings. The Baptist 'appears' and preaches a message of repentance; he invites his contemporaries to prepare the way, because the kingdom of God is now near at hand.

What is this kingdom we are being invited to prepare ourselves for? We are not speaking of an territorial kingdom, with physical frontiers; this kingdom is the time of God's rule. Since Matthew is addressing a Jewish Christian community, whose tradition is not to pronounce the name of God, he calls this the 'kingdom of heaven.' This has caused some to think of it as the 'afterlife!' John the Baptist is not inviting us to repent when we die, or when we are getting close to our death; he wants to change our life now. The time of God's rule is with us now.

Isaiah foresees this. He foretells that a new branch will grow out of the house of the great King David. Over the centuries this has been a great dream for the people of God; a new king will rise and win back the land of Palestine for its people. In the book of the prophet Isaiah, this new king comes with promises of great peace, not only among the peoples of Palestine, but for the whole of creation and the world. In the time of God's reign, animals who normally chase, attack and kill one another, will live peacefully together as one; activities that before looked dangerous, will now be safe. The child can put his hand in the whole of the cobra and the viper, and is unharmed! Isaiah promises a new creation, founded on a new set of rules!

In the time of God's rule, God himself is the ruler. Under his rule everyone will live in peace and harmony. John the Baptist announces that this new ruler has arrived, the time of God's rule has started, and it is our duty to prepare the way for this new time. Jesus, the new king, will bring about the changes promised by Isaiah. He will destroy any tree that is no longer producing fruit, and will clean up the threshing floor, storing the good grain in barns and throwing the waste chaff into the tip, where the fire burns continuously, until everything is destroyed. Trees that do not produce fruit are a waste and only tire out the earth; chaff is of no good and can only be thrown away!

Jesus, the new king, is the son of David and from the house of Jesse, as Isaiah promised. He is also the Son of God, God himself. He invites us to participate in his new rule, not a rule enforced by power and war, but peace. To participate in this rule, we need to set aside any form of violence and live in peace with God, with our neighbours and with creation. Like the wild animals in the book of the Prophet Isaiah, that learn to live with the weaker animals, we too need to learn to accept those who are vulnerable and weak in our midst and not 'judge by appearances' but be open to God's ways of peace and love.

Membership into the rule of God is through a new baptism; not John's baptism by water, as a symbol of repentance, but a baptism in the Holy Spirit and fire. To baptise means to immerse; baptism by water signifies that a person is totally immersed in water, representing death, and then comes out of the water, representing new life. Similarly, Jesus immerses his followers in the Holy Spirit, the life of God. The old self dies and we are born again to life in God. Baptism by fire means that we are consumed by this fire; a fire that consumes and purifies. The chaff and the fruitless parts in our life are removed and destroyed so that, carefully pruned, we can produce more fruit. Our job is to engage in the life of the kingdom of and allow ourselves to be reborn, cleansed by fire and refreshed by the Spirit of God.

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