

15th December 2019 (Third Sunday in Advent, Year A)

Isaiah 35:1-6,10; Psalm 145(146):6-10; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11.

'Happy is the one who does not lose faith in me.'

John the Baptist was sent with a mission to prepare the way for the anointed one of God who was coming. He lived an austere life by the river Jordan, and preached the need for repentance, as we heard last week. He also expressed anger at the Pharisees and the Sadducees who came to be baptised by John. John seems to have understood that Jesus was to come with a heavy hand to punish and destroy anyone who was not strictly following God's law.

The prophet Isaiah in the first reading already gives us a different image of the coming Messiah / Christ of God. Isaiah foresees a Messiah that gives sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, strength to the lame and forgiveness to all who had gone astray. According to Isaiah, the coming of God was a time of rejoicing and not a time of punishment and suffering.

As we know from our reading of the gospel stories, Jesus built his ministry on the model foreseen by Isaiah. He not only healed those who were sick with a variety of ailments, but also reached out and forgave those who were spiritually sick. Jesus presented himself as the merciful doctor with the power to give new life to those who had faith in God. In Jesus, God is not a merciless judge set to punish sinners, but rather a merciful judge who understands our failures and wants to reward our good deeds and our faithfulness.

John the Baptist, from prison, was confused by the reports that he was getting. He had believed that Jesus was the promised Messiah; from prison he sent messengers to clarify: 'Are you the one?' By telling John what he has been doing, Jesus points John to the prophecy of Isaiah. He is in fact fulfilling what scripture had foretold! And blessed are those who do not lose faith in the Messiah because of these conflicting opinions.

The problem faced by the Baptist stays with us even today. We often want to dress God up in a way we can recognise him and try to limit his mercy and kindness. We seem to think that because we are living a good life, then we have a right to ask God to punish those who are not following the same standards and hence are not 'good' people. The God of the New Testament is a God who is merciful in his justice. He regularly eats with sinners, inviting them back to his table, he goes out looking for the lost sheep and welcomes back the lost son and the adulterous woman! At Christmas, as we meditate the mystery of God who took on the shape of a sinful humanity, God invites us to join him in this mission of mercy, reconciliation and love. Our job is to be patient, faithful and loving witnesses to God's love and mercy. When we live good lives, it is not because we are any holier than others who do not follow our way of life; but we try to live God's will in our lives in gratitude for the mercy he has shown us.

In the second reading, the apostle James invites us to remain patient. The farmer sows the seeds and then has to wait for them to grow. He has no control over the rain, sun and wind that play a role on the development of the seed. Some seeds might be stronger than others, and shoot up quicker. We too need to be patient, quietly sowing seeds with our children, grandchildren, relatives and friends and in the environment around us. Our role is to sow and gently nurture the seeds, it is God's role to make the seed grow. Our job is not to condemn, but to witness and pray for those who seem to be weaker than us. In our relationships with others, we need to show love, forgiveness, mercy and kindness. Jesus invites us to be holy and perfect as God the Father is holy and perfect. Through imitating God, we can draw others within reach of his great mercy and love.

Let us once again open our hearts to welcome God who invites himself to take up residence in our lives.

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