

The Third Sunday of Advent 2011.

The disputes at the Euro Summit and the banking crisis generally are sending fears across many countries and there is little sign of the gloom lifting or of a clear solution. Such gloom or sense of inability was not the problem when Isaiah wrote the reading we have just heard. It had been very bad for his people not just economically but in every other way. They had been exiled and at the mercy of a powerful and ruthless king and their city of Jerusalem had been destroyed. Now that king had died, his kingdom was overthrown and the new king was friendly and sent the exiles back to their own land and their destroyed city. As they began to rebuild their lives, they began to see that God had been there all the time and was certainly with them now as they began to go from good to better.

During the difficult times a small group had not lost faith and trust in God and now, through the great Isaiah, they expressed their conviction that one person would be anointed to bring good news and to initiate a year of favour.

Whatever shape the gloom takes, however deep the darkness that envelops us might be, today with Isaiah, we proclaim the presence in our lives of one who is anointed and set apart to bring and become Good News for us. Whether to the poor, the broken hearted, the captives or those imprisoned, Jesus is present among us and comes into our lives with the power and authority to transform and heal.

John invites us to welcome into our lives the one who is, in his words, “the light”; the one who brings the baptismal gift of the Holy Spirit to those who believe and acknowledge Jesus to be the only source of all life, all hope, all healing and peace.

And that is exactly what we are doing today on this day of Advent rejoicing. The kind of rejoicing that accepts in trust and faith the presence of Jesus who shares the trials and difficulties and sins of life to transform them and turn them into opportunities to draw closer to the fullness of life that God wants for us. It is that acceptance of his gift and promise that marks our celebration of the Eucharist today. Poured into our lives is the Holy Spirit who brings Jesus the Light into every atom of our experience.

To accept in faith the gift of Jesus' presence and to welcome the light which he is into the darkness of our lives brings a challenge. Paul highlights the problem we all have when he says “never suppress the Spirit...hold on to what is good and avoid every form of evil”. Why would we ever want to suppress the Spirit that God gives and which is his presence in our lives? St. Paul knew and we all know in one way or another that part of our human nature is always inviting us not to allow the Holy Spirit to work in our lives. To be blind, to be hard hearted; to persuade ourselves that either we do not need God, or that we are too unworthy, or just that God makes life too complicated. Whatever form it takes, it is about suppressing the Spirit, as Paul puts it. We all do it, and it can be glimpsed in the sinfulness that invades our lives. The unwillingness to pray; to see good in others; to address the needs of others; to seek happiness by our own efforts; the failure to become Good News ourselves.

Our psalm this weekend is not a psalm at all. It is the song of Mary who allowed the Lord to do marvels for her. The Lord's mother did not suppress the Spirit nor did she fail to cooperate with God. There was no fear about unworthiness or God making her life too complicated. She opened her life with infinite generosity to the life and joy that God is offering us all and she was filled with good things, including her son who was also the son of God.

So how do we overcome the resistance within us? How do we, like Mary, open our lives, with all their dark corners and crevices to the healing and life giving light of Christ. The light that will lead us to see the truth both in terms of the big questions of life and the little ones as well. That is why later on, St. John describes Jesus as “the way, the truth and the life.”

St. Paul gives us three strategies, which if we follow them, will ensure that our lives become the places where the Spirit of God is at work. Strategies that will help melt that tough shell around us which constantly resists the goodness and power of God in our lives.

So, first of all St. Paul says “Be happy at all times.” By happiness he means that prevailing state of mind, heart and body that remains full of hope in the face of adversity of all kinds; that deep peace and consolation that is the fruit of an abiding trust in God. It is that trust that opens us to God’s healing Spirit and allows him to bring a joy that persists and makes us see how futile and shallow are our own efforts without God to bring ourselves happiness. “As the earth makes fresh things grow, as a garden makes seeds spring up, so will the Lord make integrity and praise spring up in the sight of the nations.”

Then Paul says “pray constantly” and he means constantly. We might be tempted to say that such advice is fine for Paul who was a saint but not for ordinary people. Let’s not be fooled. Paul meant that advice for everyone. He means that we must be generous in our time for prayer each day. Moments set apart to put ourselves in the presence of God. Yes, it may be inconvenient but the point is that our lives must be built around our prayer and not our prayer built around our lives. And we might be tempted to say, that to set moments apart is not to pray constantly. That is, of course, true, but it is the regular and generous times of prayer each day that help us see with the eyes of faith the presence of the Lord in our lives all the time. It is those same eyes of faith, formed and clarified by regular and generous prayer, that see in every event and person in life the message, promise and presence of God in Christ.

Finally Paul says “for all things give thanks to God, because that is what God expects you to do in Christ Jesus.” Every experience, person, material possession, every breath and moment of life is gift and God’s expectation is that we will give thanks for it all. We give thanks in our daily lives and we bring that thanksgiving to this celebration where it is joined to Jesus and brought perfect and divine into the life of God.

Christ is the light so that we might recognize him in our lives and find joy in his saving presence.