BREAK OPEN THE PRISON CELL

Many years ago I had the good fortune to travel to Europe to visit my sister Carol who was living near Geneva, Switzerland. I had a ready-made tour guide while I was there. One of the places Carol and my brother-in-law placed on our itinerary was this lovely hillside town of Gruyere where fondue was supposedly first made (from the cheese that was named for the town.) Nearby was the popular city of Montreux known for its international jazz festival.

Perhaps less known is the seaside town of Chillon, site of a marvelous 16th century castle. In the castle’s dungeon is a prison cell which was the scene of a famous poem by Lord Byron, the English Romantic writer, entitled “The Prisoner of Chillon.” I recall touring the ancient castle, especially its prison cell. In the bowels of the castle, in the middle of the small dark space stood a stone pillar to which a prisoner would be chained. The area around the pillar was grooved from the plodding steps of prisoners who had been confined there – their only movement being a constant circling of the pillar.

I think of that dismal place whenever I hear the story of John the Baptist confined to a prison cell by the Roman authorities. What a miserable time it must have been for the Baptist. We hear in today’s gospel that John seems to have doubts about whether Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah. John, the fiery prophet who proclaimed Jesus' coming... John, the fearless messianic herald drawing crowds and rebuking religious leaders... John, the end-of-the-world visionary scouring the banks of the Jordan with his call for repentance... that same John is now pacing a small cell and wondering if all his ministry has been a waste of time and energy. And so, desperate for some validation – of his preaching, his suffering, himself – he sends a messenger to ask a question as momentous as it is simple: "Are you the one?"

Jesus sends a message back to John languishing in his prison cell. Yes, Jesus is the One; John has not wasted his life as a prophet and herald. But the role that this Messiah takes is not what most of the people, John included, may have anticipated. As the Messiah of God, Jesus will not be a military hero. He will not take anything or anyone by force. He is the gentle Lamb of God. He will conquer neither lands nor governments at ballot boxes or with weapons of war, but only the human heart through the coercion of love. Jesus offers John the gift that the Word of God offers us today: HOPE!

In motivating the Israelites to renew their hope, the prophet Isaiah names three geographical locations: Lebanon, Carmel and Sharon. In an otherwise arid and dry desert land, these places that the prophet mentions stir up for the listener images of luxuriant forests, blossoming gardens and rich vegetation. The ancient area of Lebanon was known for its magnificent forests – the Cedars of Lebanon. Carmel, like our own nearby Carmel was situated by the sea. It rose in height above the surrounding flat lands. Its porous limestone allowed for a luxuriant growth of flowers that still cover its gentle slopes. The plane of Sharon was a place of fertile soil and flowing streams. Crocuses known as the ‘rose of Sharon’
covered the area during the fertile season. The prophet’s message was clear: in the midst of the desert, God will give unexpected and surprising growth. The parched land will come alive with beauty at the touch of God’s hand.

What is it that keeps our life like the desert -- unproductive and stifled? What can the coming of Christ mean for any of us whose enthusiasm for ourselves, our work, for the Church, or for our government and our world has dimmed? I would suggest three things that we can do in the remaining days of Advent that will water the arid soil like the recent rains that have soaked the earth.

First, take some time to re-vitalize your hopes and dreams. What does Christ’s coming mean to you? Where have you let your faith grow dim, your hopes wane or your love evaporate? How can you retrieve some of the fervor of your faith, the intensity of your family ties and your relationships? Perhaps by spending some quiet time in prayer before Christmas you can find new reasons to try harder and have greater patience for the Lord’s work to bear fruit in your life. Read the Christmas story from the Bible to yourself or to your family and glimpse again what the coming of Jesus means in your life.

Secondly, adjust the expectations you have of yourself and of others? A woman I once worked with at a parish had buttons made for everyone on the staff. The button read: “Remember! I’m doing the best that I can!” Wearing the message was a way of reminding each other about how demanding and unfair we can be to ourselves and others. Being realistic about what you can achieve and accomplish removes the burden of having to be perfect. There is only one Savior -- Jesus. We can help the mission of Christ, but we aren’t expected to do it all. St. Paul’s letter today gives us the image of a farmer: *See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains.* St. Francis de Sales offers the same sage advice: *Be patient with everyone, but above all, with yourself.*

Thirdly, acknowledge the value of who you are and what you do. The longest journey begins with a single step. Even the smallest effort you make -- to break an addictive habit; to fight bigotry and narrow-mindedness; to foster non-violence; to learn how to negotiate instead or argue at home, at school or at work; to support the many causes and charities that ask our time and financial support -- each effort will go a long way to make the vision of the gospel become a reality in our world.

We believe that a new order and a new life was inaugurated by Jesus whose birth we prepare to celebrate. We also believe that we’ve been called to share in Jesus’ ministry of bringing about that new order and new life through the power of the Holy Spirit received at our baptism. How we exercise this power will be unique to each one of us, but use it we must if we are to
fulfill our baptismal commitment. We will become frustrated as John was in his prison cell, thinking at times that our efforts are in vain. It won’t always be comfortable to live out that vocation as a prophet, but it will be comforting to know that we did our part in making a difference in our world, “hastening the coming of the day of God.”

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