Dear Friends,

New Life is possible in Adversity

Each year, the second and the third Sundays in Advent center on John the Baptist, reminding us that if we want to prepare properly for the coming of Jesus we need to listen to the Baptizer’s message. The Evangelists realized the importance of John’s message. Hence, all four of them wrote about John’s preaching, while only two of them, Mathew and Luke described the nativity of Christ. Following the style of ancient historians, Luke dates the appearance of John according to the ruling powers of the day. His Gospel heightens the paradoxical affirmation of hope despite almost impossible odds. So, Christ’s imminent coming is announced in the first chapter, in the ominous shadow of Tiberius’s rule. The Evangelist notes that Pontius Pilate is procurator, Herod is tetrarch; Annas and Caiaphas are high priests—all names that bode more doom than deliverance. These men are the mighty and the dangerous, the important and the awesome. Annas and Caiaphas had been illegally put into their positions by the Roman authorities, and constantly used their power to line their own pockets and increase their own authority. Annas was even sometimes called a viper who hissed or whispered in the ears of judges and politicians to influence their decisions. Corruption infested the holiest of positions!

Yet hidden in the badlands of their dominion, a single voice is raised to preach repentance and forgiveness. John the Baptist, mindful of Isaiah’s promise that all shall see the salvation of God, grasps that the time is ripe. Here was this hidden man, John, a voice in the wilderness of time, who was given God’s word. “Make ready the way of the Lord.” Beyond the rise and fall of the great nations, lasting longer than all the violent dictators, who has survived? What reality is important? What word has lasted? Whose voice endures? It is good for us to answer and remember. More than all the victories of the Caesars, the pomp of tetrarchs, and the grandiosity of the highest priests, it was the outsider, the baptizer, who addressed all history. The truth, uttered in adversity, holds more power than all the slogans bellowed in triumph. To which side do we owe allegiance?

John’s baptism symbolized turning from the past and turning toward a new life with God in the future. And what was repentance? It was a turning from the new Jew’s pattern of sin in the past and turning toward God. John’s baptism offered to Jews, was, thus extraordinary. It was a “baptism of repentance,” a baptism for the forgiveness of sins committed by those who were Jews already, and it required repentance (metanoeo, a change of being), which implied a turning around to proceed in a new direction. True repentance is not just a 180 degree turn from the sin, but an all-out, full-bore, frantic sprint back toward God.

John called people to repent as a way of preparing their hearts and lives for the Lord’s visit. He is calling us, too, to get ready for something so great that it fills our emptiness with expectation. A smooth road means nothing to God, but a repentant heart means a great deal. Hence, the truly important goal for us is to prepare our hearts to receive the Lord. By emphasizing the last line of the quotation “All flesh will see the salvation of God,” Luke stresses the universal aspect of God’s salvation. Having begun the section with a list of rulers who did not bring wholeness or salvation, Luke ends with the expectation of a true Lord Who can bring these about. We don’t live in a perfect world, and we don’t look to this world to see God’s salvation. For salvation, we have to look to Jesus — Jesus present in Scripture, Jesus present in the Sacraments, Jesus present as we come together in Jesus’ Name, Jesus present in the lives of his followers.

Be blessed,

Fr. Tom Kunnel C.O.

December 5, 2021
WORSHIP & MEDITATION

OPEN THE DOOR FOR CHRIST

FIRST READING
For God will show all the earth your splendor; you will be named by God forever the peace of justice, the glory of God’s worship. (Bar 5:4)

PSALM
The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy. (Ps 126)

SECOND READING
And this is my prayer: that your love may increase ever more and more in knowledge and every kind of perception, to discern what is of value, so that you may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ. (Phil 1:9-10)

GOSPEL
The winding roads shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God. (Mk 7:37)

GOSPEL MEDITATION
Encourage Deeper Understanding of Scripture

St. Ambrose shares some wisdom on our need to prepare the way and open the door for Christ. “You see that when the Word of God knocks hardest on your door, it is when his hair is wet with the dew of the night. In fact, he chooses to visit those who are in tribulation and trial, lest one of them be overwhelmed by distress. So, his head is covered with dew, with drops, when his body is laboring hard. It is important to keep watch so that when the Bridegroom comes, he is not shut out. If you are asleep and your heart is not keeping watch, he will go away without knocking; but if your heart is alert for his coming, he knocks and asks for the door to be opened to him.” When life gets overwhelming and difficult and we find ourselves feeling a bit downhearted and miserable, these words can bring great comfort.

We sometimes choose to remain stuck in our uncomfortable darkness and being stuck becomes our norm. In this time of self-focus our hearts are closed to the graces and life God desires to give us. Wrapped in the robe of mourning and misery, we fail to see the mercy, justice, and love the Bridegroom wants to bring. If we take seriously the need to prepare the way for Christ and open our hearts in preparation for his visit, we can hear God’s gentle voice calling us deep within. It beckons us to seek out its source and discover the inner calm and peace that can prevail over the darkness of despair. Sometimes our darkness is so dark that it may seem unsurmountable. Trusting in the spiritual friends who journey with us, and God’s promise may bring a glimmer of light even when it is most difficult to keep our hearts’ doors open. Sometimes, the only light in the darkness is found in trusting the faith of others both past and present.

We have to trust that God has already begun the accomplishment of good work in us and that humanity is on an incredible journey to something wonderful and awesome. God is not done. When we open the doors of our hearts, straighten the paths of our lives, and prepare the way, Jesus can come with God’s simple gifts of peace, grace, and joy. Life throws a great deal at us. It is easy to get tired and confused. We have to train our hearts to keep watch, discern what is of value, and forge ahead. Not allowing ourselves to become so weighed down by things and brought out of focus is a tremendous goal to achieve this Advent season. God is knocking. Answer the door. You will see and understand life in ways you never thought possible before.
The first reading: Baruch 5:1 - 9  
Drawing heavily on the book of Isaiah, Baruch takes up the theme of the exiles’ return from Babylon and in the retelling sees its applicability to the Jews of the diaspora. Jerusalem remains always the beckoning homeland. At this point a change of attire for daughter Jerusalem is called for to signify the transition from sorrow to celebration (v1; Is 52:1). The "cloak of justice" (v2) assuages Israel of Yahweh’s covenant fidelity. Jerusalem enjoys a priestly status, now given the miter of Aaron bearing the sacred diadem with its inscription: "Sacred to the Lord" (Ex 39:30; Is 61:10). In its resplendent glory, Jerusalem becomes to the nations a sign of God’s favor.

Jerusalem is called to an elevated position to watch the returning procession (v5). The collection of peoples from "east and west" points to the general diaspora even though the eastern desert route out of Babylon is still retained for literary reasons. The contrast between past and present is striking. A people dispersed for various reasons, frequently deported and deprived of freedom, is depicted as borne home on throne chairs and undoubtedly carried by their oppressors (v6; Is 49:22). The leveling of the terrain to facilitate the journey through the Arabian desert is an image drawn from Isaiah (v7; Is 40:3f). The desert even provides the cool and protection of a forested land as Yahweh leads his people, attended by his personified retinue, the covenant-centered “mercy and justice” (vv8f).

The book could also have been of great comfort to the Jews during the Persian period (500-300 BC), or the Hellenistic period (300-50 BC), or to Jews living in Alexandria around 200 BC, offering them a vision of hope and optimism as they struggled to keep their Faith.

As the Babylonian exiles longed to return to Jerusalem and the presence of God, so the people of God, during Advent especially, await Christ’s parousia so that we may return Home to the Promised Land, the Kingdom of God.

The second reading: Phil 1:4 - 6, 8 - 11 - This is another Pauline passage that warns the early Christians of the second coming of Jesus, referring to it as “the day of Christ” and “the day of Christ Jesus.” The passage stresses everyone’s need for that perpetual readiness to be found in leading a righteous life. Paul was very fond of the Philippian Christians and was very pleased with their spiritual progress and maturity. So, he assured them that their Heavenly Father, who had given them the gift of conversion, would continue to bring that “good work” to fruition. He would complete His work “at the day of Jesus Christ,” when Jesus would come in glory to judge the whole world. For their part, Paul prays that the Philippians’ “love may increase ever more and more, in knowledge and every kind of perception to discern what is of value so that you may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.” By virtue of our Baptism in the Lord, we are all fully-equipped with every grace we need to cooperate with God’s plan to get us to Heaven. Moreover, our Lord provides us with the graces of the other Sacraments and other actual graces throughout our lives to better ensure that we have even more assistance in getting to our Heavenly homeland, if only we will recognize and receive them and then make full use of them in changing our lives. Paul’s advice echoes the words of John the Baptist found in today’s Gospel, inviting the Jews to repent and renew their lives to welcome the Messiah.

Gospel Insights

The symbolic significance of John’s preaching at the Jordan:

The Jordan River was the place that represented the eastern border of the Promised Land, separating it from the desert — where the Jews had wandered aimlessly for 40 years after centuries of slavery in Egypt. By preaching his message there, John was inviting the Jews of his day to come out of the bondage of slavery, to leave their faults, their wandering and their sinful lives behind, and to enter into the Promised Land full of God’s blessings. The Fathers of the Church have called the Sacrament of Reconciliation our “second baptism,” in which we’re brought back to the Jordan and cleansed interiorly as we were on the day of our Christening. Advent, like Lent, is a season given to us so that we may repent of our sins and be reconciled with God and His Church by receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation. It was for this purpose that the Sacrament was instituted by Jesus after His Resurrection: “Receive the Holy Spirit: Those whose sins you forgive are forgiven; those whose sins you retain are retained” (Jn 20:18-22). It is for this on-going reconciliation, then, not just to “preach repentance and forgiveness of sins … to all nations beginning from Jerusalem” (Lk 24:47), that Jesus sent the apostles and their successors out to the ends of the world.

With the Second Vatican Council’s biblical image of the church as the people of God, there was a shift, conscious or unconscious, in our earlier thinking. The Christian life is more clearly seen as a journey, and like any journey it has its unknowns, its perils, and its surprises. We are always growing in our understanding of the faith, more willing to admit our ignorance and inadequacies, more accepting of ourselves and others. The basic truth is still there as stemming from Christ but it is constantly unfolding. In journeying toward the heavenly Jerusalem, we listen to the world and ask it to listen to us. We realize better the need to give new expression to old truths, to reconcile long held positions with new insights and developments. As pilgrims, we realize our humanness and that of the church as a whole, convinced as we are that we are guided and directed by God’s own Spirit. As Luke is at pains to indicate, our journey is part of history and involves a conversation with the world.
Now begins the second week of the Church’s world-wide retreat in preparation for Christmas. It is Advent, the quiet time, the great contrast with our culture’s wild consumer-bonanza. It lets you and me examine just how open we are to the birth of Christ in our souls. No mistake about it, we are afraid. The present era of world time discourages many of us.

Terrorism desiring to destroy our way of life, for one thing. But add in Iraq, Palestine, Chechnya, Afghanistan, Georgia, Africa, the Balkans, and so many more. And consider the gigantic unemployment and loss of jobs in the United States, the disenfranchisement of the poor, the biggest annual deficit in history, huge corruption in the most trusted and giant companies, the biggest annual budget spending increases in history, and the world-wide climate disaster—who would not be depressed?

Parents in the United States worry themselves either too little or too much about conditions for their growing children. Not just the unstoppable sale and use of drugs in high-schools and grade schools, not just sexual promiscuity as a way of life that is being aggressively marketed to the youth segment of the population, but also the increasing collapse of values that we call the “new morality,” but which is really dissolution. In the face of all this, who can just sit back and have Advent? Take off your robe of mourning and misery; put on the splendor of glory from God forever: wrapped in the cloak of justice from God, bear on your head the crown that displays the glory of the eternal name. God will show all the earth your splendor: you will be named by God forever as the peace of justice, the glory of God’s worship.

We seem to be torn between two realities: dire human situation and spiritual pull towards wholeness. As Paul is alluding to the Thessalonians we need to enter into ‘discernment’. Knowing that the will of God in concrete situations requires a kind of aesthetic sensibility, John A. T. Robinson once spoke of the Christian as having a set of built-in antennae to tell him or her what love requires in a particular situation.

QUIZ TIME

1. Who was sent to prepare the way of the Lord?
   A) Jesus  B) Isaiah  C) Herod  D) John the Baptist

2. John told people to receive baptism as a sign of what?
   A) Repentance of sin  B) Going to the Temple  C) Preparing for Christmas  D) Becoming a disciple

3. Which prophet wrote about John as a ‘voice in the wilderness’?
   A) Jeremiah  B) Isaiah  C) Ezekiel  D) Amos

4. Who ruled the world when John appeared?
   A) Greeks  B) Babylonians  C) Romans  D) Egyptians

5. John was the son of ————
   A) Joseph  B) Zechariah  C) Philip  D) Pilate

QUIZ ANSWERS


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