

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

December 15/2013

Isaiah 35: 1-6a, 10; James 5: 7-10; Matthew 11: 2-11

Introduction

A lady went to see a marriage counselor because she and her husband were not getting along very well. The counselor questioned her: "Tell me, do you wake up grumpy in the mornings?" She replied, "No, I usually let him wake up on his own." I tell that little story simply to introduce the fact that today's Gospel raises questions. John the Baptist has questions about Jesus. Jesus asks questions about John. This is a Sunday on which we need to ask ourselves two questions.

First, Do We Really See Jesus as Our Saviour and Our Leader?

It may seem odd to ask that question. Yet consider for a moment. John the Baptist had trouble with the question of whether or not Jesus was really the Messiah. He expected that God's promised prophet would be a fiery preacher of judgment, someone who would draw a line in the sand and say: Ship up or ship out! Many of the religious leaders of the day had questions too. They expected God's prophet to be a spectacular political leader who would drive out the Romans and make them a strong and prosperous nation. Of course Jesus was neither of these.

What about us? Do we really accept Jesus as God who has come among us? Do we see him as our model and hero in daily life? Do we accept the Sermon on the Mount as the guide for our lifestyle? Let me take one example. Prior to the year 1500 most people pursued meaning as the goal of life. In other words, most of them saw life fulfilled in carrying out a particular vocation in the world. They found satisfaction in their conviction that they were carrying out their role in God's overall plan.

In the past 500 years however it has become common in our western world to pursue money and possessions as the goal of life. If we find we have largely bought into this social outlook then we do not really see Jesus as our leader and model. Perhaps we can see this question in a different way by putting it as follows. Do we see Christmas as a time for receiving more possessions, more material goods, more creature comforts? Or do we see Christmas primarily as a time for giving, especially to the poor of the world, as a way of expressing our gratitude for the love God has shown to us? Yet another way of putting the question is this. Do we honestly try to measure up to the demands of our faith even when that means taking an unpopular stand? Jesus puts it plainly in today's Gospel: "Blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me."

Second, Do We Really Believe the Better Times Promised by Isaiah Have Now Begun?

Some years ago representatives of the Catholic dioceses on the continent of Africa met in Rome. One of the questions they dealt with was: "In a continent full of bad news, how is the Christian message 'good news' for our people?" In the midst of wars, famine, corruption, they asked, does the Gospel give reason for hope? Each of us can ask: Has the coming of Jesus made a difference to our world?

The answer is that it has made a difference in countless ways. I think, for example, of how our faith, the word of God, the sacraments bring hope to our lives, and of the countless examples of holiness that bear witness to this. I think too of the new vision of

the value of every person in the eyes of God that Christianity has brought. However instead of trying to make a list of the things Christianity has accomplished in our world, I think we need to note two things.

First, the full vision promised by Isaiah will not be achieved until the end of time. We live in a time of partial fulfillment. Change takes time, and it requires patience. Yet because the building of the kingdom is primarily God's doing, it is most certainly something that is happening. There are many signs of the kingdom, if we look. Many social movements of our time are good and represent God's grace breaking through. The emphasis on human rights, the work for peace, the concern for the environment, surely God is at work here, even if such movements involve some ambiguity.

Second, God intends to work through us and so requires our human cooperation. Christmas ought to mean for all of us a new appreciation of the fact that God can change the world through us. What are needed are men and women who trust the Lord enough to live out their faith in daily life, to give witness to Christ by truly following the priorities of the gospel, even in the face of opposition. In every walk of life, we, as followers of Christ, ought to be shaping the world, not just letting the world shape us.

Conclusion

A modern writer has said: "I wake up in the morning torn between the desire to enjoy the world and to improve the world. That makes it difficult to plan the day." That is a good expression of the tension that is part of every Christian's life. The Messiah has come, and so there are many things in our life that are cause for rejoicing. However the kingdom won't be fully established until Christ comes again, and in the meantime he intends to work through us to make a difference in our world.