



Fr. Ambrose Bennett

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT, YEAR B

In our gospel this morning St. John the Baptist appears as the herald of the Lord's coming, telling the people of Israel and us, too, to "prepare the way of the Lord, to make straight his paths." For four centuries, the voice of true prophecy had fallen silent in Israel; at last, in John, prophecy was heard once more. Jesus himself says, John was a prophet and more than a prophet (Lk 7.26), through whom the Holy Spirit completes the mission of the prophets.

But there is here an allusion to something even greater than the voice of prophecy. In the voice of John, there was an echo of a much greater voice, the voice that Israel had heard on Mt. Sinai. In the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses recounts what happened on Mt. Sinai:

There words the LORD spoke to all you assembly at the mountain out of the midst of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness with a loud voice; and he added no more. And he wrote them upon two tables of stone, and gave them to me. And when you heard the voice out of the midst of the darkness, while the mountain was burning with fire, you came near to me, all the heads of your tribes, and your elders; and you said, 'Behold, the LORD our God has shown us his glory and greatness, and we have heard his voice of the midst of the fire; we have this day seen God speak with man and man still live. Now therefore why should we die? For this great fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of the LORD our God any more, we shall die. For who is there of all flesh, that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of fire, as we have, and has still lived? [To Moses the people said,] Go near, and hear all that the LORD our God will say; and speak to us all that the LORD our God will speak to you; and we will hear and do it (Dt 5.22-27).

The words of Isaiah say, "A voice cries out: in the desert, prepare the way of the LORD!" The words "in the desert" go with the second phrase, the call to Israel to prepare the way of the LORD. The situation of Israel is one of awaiting redemption, waiting in the desert to be led into the Promised Land; God has spoken, and yet his people have been unfaithful to the covenant. Isaiah proclaims that the theophany, the revelation of God himself, will be restored in Israel in a way beyond even what Moses saw:

Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, fear not;
say to the cities of Judah,
"Behold your God!" (Is 40.9).



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



About fifty years ago, Jewish psychiatrist named Karl Stern wrote the story of his Catholic conversion. He spoke of his return to Orthodox Judaism and of his simultaneous discovery of the profoundly Judaic nature of Christianity, especially in the gospel and letters of St. John. Karl Stern met the famous Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, and told Buber how astonishing it was to find that the purest essence of Israel's faith distilled in the New Testament. Buber surprisingly agreed and recognized the appeal of Christianity but found the notion of the Incarnation—of God becoming man—very difficult. And yet, Buber said to Dr. Stern that the crucial question is this: did God really speak from the Burning Bush and on Mt. Sinai with an actual perceptible voice, in real human words? Or was it simply some other kind of revelatory experience?" Dr. Stern was puzzled at this answer but then thought about it later. Martin Buber was of course being perfectly sensible: if the divine Voice had truly made itself heard in time and space—while God remained the transcendent Holy One of Israel—, then the Incarnation was also possible.

The John's role is to proclaim the advent of the consolation of Israel: he is the "voice" of the Holy Spirit, the Consoler, who is to come. As the Holy Spirit of truth would also do, John "came to bear witness to the light" (Jn 1.7), and like the Bridegroom's friend, to diminish that Christ might increase.

John's urgent words have echoed through the centuries and throughout the world, bidding us to prepare for the Lord's coming at Christmas and also for his return in glory and in judgment on the last day. The voice of John the Baptist continues to resonate because conversion will always be necessary, and the life of continual conversion will not be completed as long as we are on our earthly pilgrimage. This conversion, this life of repentance, is not simply or even primarily a matter of being regretful and sorrowing over our sins; it is something far more than that. Yes, this conversion is a turning away from sin; but more importantly, it is a turning toward God, a return to the source of life and light.

It is not enough that we are members of God's people, just as it was not enough for the contemporaries of our Lord to have Abraham for their father. We are called to produce the fruits in which our conversion is embodied. This conversion is connected with baptism: both the baptism of John (which symbolized repentance and amendment of life) and the baptism of Christ, which actually communicates to us this new life. For the baptism of Christ is a baptism in fire and in the Holy Spirit, a supernatural rebirth that makes us members of Christ's Mystical Body, the Catholic Church.

Sacramental confession does precisely that in the Christian life. In confession, in the tribunal of mercy, no one accuses us; we accuse ourselves, and so open ourselves to the mercy of God. In the sacrament of penance, no one is pointing fingers or casting any stones. In confession, the purifying judgment of God becomes a means of healing and sanctifying rather than of condemnation. That is what it truly means to be justified—or made right with God-- by grace. For when in the sacrament of penance we come to Christ



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with empty hands, we can truly say with the prophet Jeremiah, “God is our justice.” For this reason, the Catechism says that the forgiveness of sins is a miracle like the creation of the universe or the resurrection of the dead (CCC 298).

If we would share the joy of Advent, we must recover our sense of God’s holiness and of his judgment as well as of his mercy. In practical terms, I have two suggestions for this Advent: confession and the prayer of the rosary of Our Lady. The rosary is especially fitting at this time of year because Advent is the Marian season *par excellence*, and in Mary we behold the most perfect fruit of the grace of Christ. I urge you to resume praying the rosary if you have let it slip away. If possible, pray it together as a family. By holding fast both to confession and to a tender devotion to the Mother of God, we hold inseparably to God’s love and to his utter holiness. Confession reminds us that we need true repentance and amendment of life; and by invoking the glorious intercession of Our Lady, our hope is raised to the heavenly Jerusalem, where she has preceded us. For Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end; and the glory of Our Lady is precisely to be perfectly conformed to her divine Son.