

## December 4, II Sunday in Advent

On the one hand, salvation is God's doing, and we cannot earn His blessings. We are saved by His grace. On the other hand, we must cooperate with God's grace because God cannot force his bounty upon us. That is why John the Baptist in today's Gospel summons us to play our essential part by leading lives of repentance, conversion, and renewal, thus preparing the way for the Lord's second coming. We start this process by spiritually preparing for the annual celebration of Christmas, the Lord's first coming, as we reform and renew our lives by repentance and works of charity.

John the Baptist was the last in a long line of prophets who foretold the coming of the Messiah. He prepared the way for the Messiah by alerting God's people to the Messiah's impending arrival and by challenging them to change their lives by repenting for their sins. A radical abandonment of sinful living was required because God was going to communicate with his people directly through his Son, Jesus, the Messiah.

John's ministry focused on preaching conversion and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. Repentance is a fundamental change of heart, or attitude, which results in leaving sin behind and embracing God's freely shared life and love. Such change is only possible with the gift of God's grace. There was urgency in John's preaching about repentance. The time for repentance, he said, is now, not in the future. Repentance through prayer, fasting and charitable works leads to conversion, and conversion is an important aspect of people's preparation if they are to meet Christ when he comes.

John understood from his own experience in the wilderness, where he spent a long time in prayer and reflection, that repentance and conversion were absolutely necessary. Otherwise their hearts would remain closed by sinful preoccupations and they would not be able to recognise the Messiah when he arrived. And, if they could not recognise him, neither would they be able to acknowledge him as the fulfilment of God's promise to liberate his people. Without a 'change-of-heart' (metanoia in the original Greek), a turning back towards God, there could be no appreciation of the Messiah's presence among them.

We learn from the gospels that John fasted and did penance, wore camel hair and ate locusts and wild honey. So there was a strong witness dimension in his efforts to prepare the way for Christ to come into the people's lives. He was courageous and unapologetic in how he spoke. This witness and courage provided him with great credibility and, consequently, many people felt invited to consider seriously the relevance of his message because they noticed how he had taken it to heart himself. But his preaching made him unpopular with some people because they could not accept the truth, and remained unrepentant.

We need to prepare for Christ's coming by allowing him to be reborn daily in our lives: Advent is the time for us to make this preparation by repenting of our sins and renewing our lives through prayer, penance, and the sharing of our blessings with others. Let us humbly admit the truth with the German mystic Angelus Silesius "Christ could be born a thousand times in Bethlehem – but all in vain until He is born in me." He means that Jesus must be reborn in our heart during this season of Advent and every day of our lives, radiating his love, kindness, mercy, forgiveness, and spirit of humble service to the world through our lives.

We need to answer the call for a change of life. John the Baptist challenges our superficial attempts at change, demanding that, while we are obeying the commandments faithfully, we must correct our relationships with others, mend ruptures, soothe frictions, face family responsibilities, work honestly, and treat our employers and employees justly. Let us share our love with others as selfless and humble service. "Do small things but with great love" advise St. Theresa of Lisieux and St. Teresa of Calcutta (Mother Teresa). Therefore, following John's advice, let us celebrate the memory of Jesus' first advent, prepare for Jesus' daily advent into our lives through the Sacraments and the Bible, and wait confidently for his second advent at our death and/or at the end of the world.