

Second Sunday of Advent – Year B – 12/10/17

My dear people of God: I wish to start our reflection today with the famous quotation from the prophet Isaiah which is in fact our First Reading: *“... speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her service is at an end, her guilt is expiated; indeed, she has received from the hand of the LORD double for all her sins.*

Listening to this part of the first reading makes us recall the lyrics of the song “Whispering Hope” composed by Septimus Winner (1827-1902) who took a female pseudonym Alice Hawthorne. The song quotes a lot from today’s first reading:

*Soft as the voice of an angel, breathing a lesson unheard,
Hope with a gentle persuasion whispers her comforting word:
Wait till the darkness is over, wait till the tempest is done,
Hope for the sunshine tomorrow, after the shower is gone.*

*Refrain:
Whispering hope, oh, how welcome thy voice,
Making my heart in its sorrow rejoice.*

*If, in the dusk of the twilight, dim be the region afar,
Will not the deepening darkness brighten the glimmering star?*

*Then when the night is upon us, why should the heart sink away?
When the dark midnight is over, watch for the breaking of day.*

*Hope, as an anchor so steadfast, rends the dark veil for the soul,
Whither the Master has entered, robbing the grave of its goal;*

*Come then, oh, come, glad fruition, come to my sad weary heart;
Come, O Thou blest hope of glory, never, oh, never depart.*

As we continue reflecting on the first reading, we will encounter the famous quotation from Isaiah which Mark will use in today’s gospel to describe the attributes of John the Baptist: *“A voice cries out: In the desert prepare the way of the LORD! Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our*

God! Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill shall be made low; the rugged land shall be made a plain, the rough country, a broad valley. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken. . . ”.

Towards the end of the reading, Isaiah says: *“Fear not to cry out and say to the cities of Judah: Here is your God! Here comes with power the Lord GOD, who rules by his strong arm; here is his reward with him, his recompense before him. Like a shepherd he feeds his flock; in his arms he gathers the lambs, carrying them in his bosom, and leading the ewes with care.”*

Summing up our appreciation of the first reading, we are happy to realize that God our Father does His own business ending our misery: He recognizes our repentance by our expiation. He gives us double merits for our repentance from our sins.

Our second reading affords us another source of positive energy. Saint Peter tells us: *“The Lord does not delay his promise, as some regard "delay," but he is patient with you, not wishing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. . . . Therefore, beloved, since you await these things, be eager to be found without spot or blemish before him, at peace.*

I love to emphasize the first stanza of our psalm which is Psalm 85. It goes this way: *I will hear what God proclaims; the LORD—for he proclaims peace to his people. Near indeed is his salvation to those who fear him, glory dwelling in our land.*

We should be advancing toward the peace that Yahweh has promised during the time of Isaiah and during this Advent Season. I find the words of Donders very appropriate when he says, "peace is the opposite of pieces; to be at peace means to be of one piece."

Brothers and sisters: It is obvious to all of us that today, second Sunday of Advent, the church invites us to take to heart, John the Baptist's exhortation: *"prepare the way of the Lord!"*

In today's gospel, we heard from the very beginning of the gospel of the Evangelist Mark that John the Baptist was encouraging people to go

back to the Lord. This is the fulfillment of a prophecy from Isaiah which we heard from our first reading. This prophecy was made seven hundred years earlier by Isaiah to the people of Israel that when it is the time of the Messiah's coming, a voice will cry out to prepare them. Isaiah told the people to make a highway for the Lord.

Talking about a highway, I think of this image often when I drive through or near a highway construction project. I'm amazed at how a mountainous area can end up with a straight highway after the hills are leveled and bridges are built over rivers and ravines. Imagine what it took to build a highway 2,700 years ago during the time of Isaiah.

The image of building a highway for the Lord was even more spectacular when you think of the work that was done without heavy equipment.

When John the Baptist makes the announcement to get ready for the Lord he makes it clear that the highway for the Lord leads to our hearts. John the Baptist takes his prophetic call seriously and lives a life of prayer and fasting. His message is a simple message, "repent." He offers a baptism of repentance for those who accept his call. A baptism that is meant to prepare them to recognize and accept Jesus as Messiah and Lord.

We need to recognize our brokenness. Blaise Pascal put it so bluntly: "*There are only two kinds of men: the righteous who think they are sinners and the sinners who think they are righteous.*"

John the Baptist is everything the Priests, Scribes and Pharisees are not. They are in the Temple, he is in the wilderness. They live luxurious lives, he lives a primitive life. They are unpopular, he is immensely popular. They are proud, he is humble. He proclaims the immediate coming of the Messiah, they do everything they can to obscure His coming. The more we look, the more we will see sour contrasts between them. It is very important that John proclaims the Advent of the Messiah in the wilderness. The desert for him is a symbol of the religious situation of Israel. They were formerly a people with great faith and trust in God who had led them into the Promised Land. But now the religious authorities were content with a comfortable, outwardly-conforming sort of religion and see no room or even reason for change. *At this point, I plead you to pray for me. I need to be a copy of that simple spokesperson of the Messiah.*

John attracts the common people into the wilderness to hear his message of repentance so that they are purified and spiritually ready for the coming of the Messiah.

They perceive John to be a genuine prophet and are convinced by his message. That John proclaims his message in the hardship of the wilderness gives his message an added air of authenticity. Advent itself is designed by the Church to be a sort of liturgical wilderness to prepare for the celebration of the Birth of Christ.

John was a charismatic figure whose deep faith, austere life-style, and bold message attracted people. Some had their brief time in his presence watching him, listening to him, and repenting because of their encounter with him. He was called, not to be the Messiah, but to prepare the way for Him, and he did this dutifully and humbly.

This leads us to ask ourselves the question, "How am I doing at preparing the way of the Lord, by building that highway for the Lord to get into my heart?"

We cannot allow Black Fridays and Cyber Mondays to be given far more attention than what is given to Advent. Advent Calendars used to be a wholly Christian tradition but now they have been hijacked by chocolate manufacturers.

Brothers and sisters: no matter what God has called us to, it takes humility, sincerity of heart, and fortitude to do it well. It involves filling in the emptiness of valley, and cutting away the mountains that blind us. It means removing detours that we sometimes take so as to avoid conversion, and removing the toll booths that we put up to make travel costly. In doing this well we are making way for the Lord.

This second Sunday of Advent is a good time to take to heart both the message and the example of John the Baptist. As we sing "Maranatha, Come, Lord Jesus" we will have a highway for Him to come to our hearts, and we will have the humility to point others to Jesus.