

Homily For Third Sunday of Advent
December 16, 2007

Introduction

This week and last we centered on one of the two great Advent figures, John the Baptist. Next week, on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, we shall look particularly at the other, Mary the Mother of Jesus.

Just by the way, it might be good if we continue and conclude this Advent season and move into the approaching Christmastime thinking of Mary not so much as our mother but rather as Pope Paul describes her in a pastoral letter he wrote: "truly our sister". A lovely image and for me at least one that makes Mary much more accessible.

I

Today it's John the Baptist. However, we get a very different picture of him than the one we saw last week: the wild man out there in the desert, dressed in a coarse camel's hair covering with a leather belt around his waist; eating locusts and wild honey, castigating the phony religious leaders of his people, calling them "your brood of vipers"; and above all telling anyone who would listen to "repent, for the Reign of Heaven is at hand".

II

Today's view of John puts him much closer to us, I believe: vulnerable, doubting, wondering if he has wasted his life by backing the wrong person. We find him in jail for confronting Herod as an adulterer because Herod had taken his brother's wife as his own and John had to speak truth to power. He probably feels that his life is pretty much over - as indeed it shortly will be - and seems to be experiencing the temptation to despair, one that all of us undergo from time to time: did my life have any meaning. John sends word to Jesus asking "are you the one who is to come or should we look for another?"

John's is an Advent question, one that all of us might ask: are we foolish to expect Jesus' return? Are we wasting our lives in trying to live Jesus' way?

III

The answer Jesus gives to John - and to us - is both a consolation and a challenge. It's a consolation in that Jesus simply directs John's attention to what is happening as proof that he, Jesus, is the one expected by all the prophets; he is fulfilling what Isaiah and all the others foretold: the eyes of the blind see; the ears of the deaf hear; the lame leap like stags and the tongues of the mute sing - and above all "the poor have the good news proclaimed to them". In other words the Reign of God is breaking in on human history as Jesus exercises his ministry.

Jesus' answer is a challenge as well. We are the keepers of this dream today, no less than the chosen people who awaited a Savior for 3000 years.

IV

Particularly here in the heart of the empire and in the election year that awaits us we have to ask ourselves:

Who will be and speak good news to the poor, if not we?

Who will help those paralyzed by fear to walk, if not we?

Who will open the eyes of those blinded by consumerism, militarism, sexism, egoism and all the other isms to see, if not we?

Who will welcome those considered unclean, unwelcome, unworthy, if not we?

Who will open deaf ears with the truth that sets us all free, if not we?

Who will raise those who are dead in despair and without hope, if not we?

Conclusion

We do hold the dream and it's magnificent, as we hear it proclaimed in the prophetic readings for this season of Advent, particularly the soaring prose of Isaiah. And it's very ordinary and we see the dream lived out by Jesus. May we understand our vocation that way - as wonderful, inspiring, world changing; and as ordinary as our day-to-day activities that make up God's Reign entering human history - or not.