

GOSPEL

MATTHEW 3:1-12

In due course John the Baptist appeared; he preached in the wilderness of Judaea and this was his message: 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand!' This was the man the prophet spoke of when he said:

A voice cries in the wilderness: Prepare a way for the Lord, make his paths straight.

This man John wore a garment made of camel-hair with a leather belt round his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem and all Judaea and the whole Jordan district made their way to him, and as they were baptised by him in the river Jordan they confessed their sins. But when he saw a number of Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism he said to them, 'Brood of vipers, who warned you to fly from the retribution that is coming? But if you are repentant, produce the appropriate fruit, and do not presume to tell yourselves, "We have Abraham for our father," because, I tell you, God can raise children for Abraham from these stones. Even now the axe is laid to the roots of the trees, so that any tree which fails to produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown on the fire. I baptise you in water for repentance, but the one who follows me is more powerful than I am, and I am not fit to carry his sandals; he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fan is in his hand; he will clear his threshing-floor and gather his wheat into the barn; but the chaff he will burn in a fire that will never go out.'

The Gospel of the Lord.

A REFLECTION BY POPE FRANCIS

In the Gospel given this second Sunday of Advent, John the Baptist's invitation resounds: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!". With these very words, Jesus begins his mission in Galilee; and such will also be the message that the disciples must bring on their first missionary experience.

Matthew the evangelist would like to present John as the one who prepares the way of the coming Christ, as well as the disciples as followers, as Jesus preached. It is a matter of the same joyful

message: the kingdom of God is at hand! It is near, and it is in us! These words are very important: "The kingdom of God is in our midst!", Jesus says. And John announces what Jesus will say later: "The kingdom of God is at hand, it has arrived, and is in your midst". This is the central message of every Christian mission. When a missionary goes, a Christian goes to proclaim Jesus, not to proselytize, as if he were a fan trying to drum up new supporters for his team. No, he goes simply to proclaim: "The kingdom of God is in our midst!". And in this way, the missionaries prepare the path for Jesus to encounter the people.

But what is this kingdom of God, this kingdom of heaven? They are synonymous. We think immediately of the afterlife: eternal life. Of course this is true, the kingdom of God will extend without limit beyond earthly life, but the good news that Jesus brings us — and that John predicts — is that we do not need to wait for the kingdom of God in the future: it is at hand. In some way it is already present and we may experience spiritual power from now on. "The kingdom of God is in your midst!", Jesus will say. God comes to establish his lordship in our history, today, every day, in our life; and there — where it is welcomed with faith and humility — love, joy and peace blossom.

The condition for entering and being a part of this kingdom is to implement a change in our life, which is to convert, to convert every day, to take a step forward each day. It is a question of leaving behind the comfortable but misleading ways of the idols of this world: success at all costs; power to the detriment of the weak; the desire for wealth; pleasure at any price. And instead, preparing the way of the Lord: this does not take away our freedom, but gives us true happiness. With the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, it is God himself who abides among us to free us from self interest, sin and corruption, from these manners of the devil: seeking success at all costs; seeking power to the detriment of the weak; having the desire for wealth; seeking pleasure at any price.

Christmas is a day of great joy, even external, but above all, it is a religious event for which a spiritual preparation

is necessary. In this season of Advent, let us be guided by the Baptist's exhortation: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight!", he tells us. We prepare the way of the Lord and make his paths straight when we examine our conscience, when we scrutinize our attitudes, in order to eliminate these sinful manners that I mentioned, which are not from God: success at all costs; power to the detriment of the weak; the desire for wealth; pleasure at any price.

May the Virgin Mary help us to prepare ourselves for the encounter with this ever greater Love, which is what Jesus brings and which, on Christmas night, becomes very very small, like a seed fallen on the soil. And Jesus is this seed: the seed of the kingdom of God.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. John [and later Jesus] proclaim: 'the kingdom of God is close at hand' — where do you see the 'fruits of the kingdom' being expressed? In what ways do you already see it as 'close at hand'?
2. What are some of your struggles in approaching and realising the kingdom of God in your own life — from what might you need to 'repent' in order for Jesus and his kingdom to be a more significant reality?

PRAYER

Spend some time in prayer with one another

1. Conscious of what has just been shared, members briefly name/ describe their prayer needs.
2. Intentionally call on the Holy Spirit to be present (e.g. "Come Holy Spirit, please be present as we pray")
3. Move to prayers of thanks and praise to God.
4. Pray for each others' prayer needs. Where appropriate, you may like to encourage the group to place a hand on the shoulder of the individual that you are currently praying for.
5. Conclude your prayer time with another prayer of praise, perhaps reciting the 'Glory Be' or similar prayer.