

GOSPEL

MATTHEW 11:2-11

John in his prison had heard what Christ was doing and he sent his disciples to ask him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or have we got to wait for someone else?' Jesus answered, 'Go back and tell John what you hear and see; the blind see again, and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised to life and the Good News is proclaimed to the poor; and happy is the man who does not lose faith in me.'

As the messengers were leaving, Jesus began to talk to the people about John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swaying in the breeze? No? Then what did you go out to see? A man wearing fine clothes? Oh no, those who wear fine clothes are to be found in palaces. Then what did you go out for? To see a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and much more than a prophet: he is the one of whom scripture says: Look, I am going to send my messenger before you; he will prepare your way before you. I tell you solemnly, of all the children born of women, a greater than John the Baptist has never been seen; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he is.'

The Gospel of the Lord.

A REFLECTION BY POPE FRANCIS

Today we celebrate the Third Sunday of Advent, which is characterized by Saint Paul's invitation: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.... The Lord is at hand" (Phil 4:4-5). It is not a superficial or purely emotional cheerfulness that the Apostle exhorts, nor is it the cheerfulness of worldliness or of consumerism. No, it is not that, but rather, it entails a more authentic joy, the taste of which we are called to rediscover. The taste of true joy. It is a joy that touches our innermost being, as we await Jesus, who has already come to bring salvation to the world, the promised Messiah, born in Bethlehem of the Virgin Mary. The liturgy of the Word offers us the appropriate context for understanding and living out this joy. Isaiah speaks of wilderness, of dry land, of plains (cf. 35:1); the Prophet has

before him weak hands, feeble knees, fearful hearts, people who are blind, deaf and dumb (cf. vv. 3-6). The context of this situation is desolation, an inexorable fate without God.

But finally salvation is proclaimed: "Be strong, fear not!" — the Prophet says — "Behold, your God.... He will come and save you" (cf. Is 35:4). And straight away everything is transformed: the desert blooms, comfort and joy permeate hearts (cf. vv. 5-6).

These signs proclaimed by Isaiah as signs of salvation which is already present; they are fulfilled in Jesus. He himself affirms it by responding to the messengers sent by John the Baptist — what does Jesus say to these messengers? "The blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up" (Mt 11:5). They are not words, but are facts which demonstrate how salvation, brought by Jesus, seizes the human being and regenerates him. God has entered history in order to free us from the slavery of sin; he set his tent in our midst in order to share our existence, to heal our lesions, to bind our wounds and to give us new life. Joy is the fruit of this intervention of God's salvation and love.

We are called to let ourselves be drawn in by the feeling of exultation. This exultation, this joy.... But a Christian who isn't joyful is a Christian who is lacking something, or else is not a Christian! It is heartfelt joy, the joy within which leads us forth and gives us courage. The Lord comes, he comes into our life as a liberator; he comes to free us from all forms of interior and exterior slavery. It is he who shows us the path of faithfulness, of patience and of perseverance because, upon his return, our joy will be overflowing. Christmas is near, the signs of his approach are evident along our streets and in our houses; here too, in Saint Peter's Square, the Nativity scene has been placed with the tree beside it. These outward signs invite us to welcome the Lord who always comes and knocks at our door, knocks at our heart, in order to draw near to us; he invites us to recognize his footsteps among the brothers and sisters who pass beside us, especially the weakest and most needy.

Today we are called to rejoice for the imminent coming of our Redeemer; and we are called to share this joy with others, giving comfort and hope to the poor, the sick, and to people who are lonely and unhappy. May the Virgin Mary, the "handmaid of the Lord", help us to hear God's voice in prayer and to serve him with compassion in our brothers, so as to be prepared for the Christmas appointment, preparing our hearts to welcome Jesus.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Who or what are you looking for in life, for your life — even John was looking for someone? Where do you find this presence, how do you experience its reality?
2. Jesus is saying that the evidence of the coming kingdom and of him being the Son of God can be found in new life springing from the wilderness — deaf hear, blind see, lame walk! What signs of transformation have you seen around you that tell you the 'kingdom is close at hand' and that Jesus 'is the one who is to come'?
3. Where do you find joy and hope in your life — as Pope Francis asks — are you a person of deep joy because of your relationship with Jesus?

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.