

## GOSPEL

JOHN 1:6-8, 19-28

A man came, sent by God. His name was John. He came as a witness, as a witness to speak for the light, so that everyone might believe through him.

He was not the light, only a witness to speak for the light. This is how John appeared as a witness. When the Jews sent priests and levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' he not only declared, but he declared quite openly, 'I am not the Christ.' 'Well then,' they asked 'are you Elijah?' 'I am not' he said. 'Are you the Prophet?' He answered, 'No.' So they said to him, 'Who are you? We must take back an answer to those who sent us. What have you to say about yourself?' So John said, 'I am, as Isaiah prophesied: a voice that cries in the wilderness: make a straight way for the Lord.'

Now these men had been sent by the Pharisees, and they put this further question to him, 'Why are you baptising if you are not the Christ, and not Elijah, and not the Prophet?' John replied, 'I baptise with water; but there stands among you, unknown to you, the one who is coming after me; and I am not fit to undo his sandal-strap.' This happened at Bethany, on the far side of the Jordan, where John was baptising.

## A REFLECTION BY POPE FRANCIS

In recent Sundays the liturgy has emphasized what it means to assume an attitude of *vigilance* and what *preparing the way* of the Lord entails, concretely. On this Third Sunday of Advent, called the "Sunday of joy", the liturgy invites us to welcome the *spirit* with which all this happens, that is, precisely, joy. Saint Paul invites us to prepare for the coming of the Lord, by assuming three attitudes. Listen carefully: three attitudes. First, constant joy; second, steadfast prayer; third, continuous thanksgiving. Constant joy, steadfast prayer and continuous thanksgiving.

The first attitude, *constant joy*: "Rejoice always", Saint Paul says. This means always being joyful, even when things do not go according to our wishes; but there is that profound joy, which is peace:

that too is joy; it is within. And peace is a joy "at the ground level", but it is a joy. Distress, difficulties and suffering pass through each person's life, we are all familiar with them; and so often the reality that surrounds us seems to be inhospitable and barren, similar to the desert in which the voice of John the Baptist resonated, as today's Gospel passage recalls (cf. Jn 1:23). But the very words of the Baptist reveal that our joy rests on a certainty, that this desert is inhabited: "among you" — he says — "stands one whom you do not know" (v. 26). It refers to Jesus, the Father's envoy who comes, as Isaiah stresses, "to bring good tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (61:1-2). These words, which Jesus will speak in his discourse at the synagogue of Nazareth (cf. Lk 4:16-19), clarify that his mission in the world consists in the liberation from sin and from the personal and social slavery that it produces. He has come to the earth to restore to mankind the dignity and freedom of the Children of God — which only he can communicate — and thereby to give joy.

The joy which characterizes the awaiting of the Messiah is based on *steadfast* prayer: this is the second attitude. Saint Paul says: "pray constantly" (1 Thess 5:17). By praying we can enter a stable relationship with God, who is the source of true joy. A Christian's joy is not bought; it cannot be bought. It comes from faith and from the encounter with Jesus Christ, the reason for our happiness. And when we are rooted in Christ, the closer we are to Jesus, the more we find inner peace, even among everyday contradictions. For this reason a Christian, having encountered Jesus, cannot be a prophet of misfortune, but a witness and herald of joy. A joy to share with others; an infectious joy that renders the journey of life less toilsome.

The third attitude Paul points to is *continuous thanksgiving*, which is grateful love towards God. Indeed, he is very generous to us, and we are invited to always recognize his beneficence, his

merciful love, his patience and goodness, thus living in unceasing thanksgiving.

Joy, prayer and gratitude are three attitudes that prepare us to experience Christmas in an authentic way. Joy, prayer and gratitude. In this last period of the Season of Advent, let us entrust ourselves to the maternal intercession of the Virgin Mary. She is a "cause of our joy", not only because she begot Jesus, but because she keeps directing us to him.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- How would you describe who you are in the sight of God? How would the Father describe who you are in his eyes?
- John points the way to Jesus and prepares people to receive Him, the Christ. In what ways, like John, do you point the way towards Jesus?
- Joy, prayer and gratitude are three attitudes that prepare us to experience Christmas in an authentic way — how do you experience these in your life and what affect do they have upon you and your relationship with God?

## 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.