

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

On this third Sunday of Advent, known as the Sunday "of joy", the Word of God invites us on the one hand to joy, and on the other hand to the awareness that existence also includes moments of doubt, in which it is difficult to believe. Joy and doubt are both experiences that are part of our lives.

To the explicit invitation to joy of the prophet Isaiah: "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom" (Is 35: 1), the Gospel opposes the doubt of John the Baptist: "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?". Indeed, the prophet sees beyond the situation; he discouraged people before him: weak hands, trembling knees, lost hearts (cf. Is 35: 3-4). It is the same reality that in every age puts faith to the

test. But the man of God looks beyond, because the Holy Spirit makes his heart feel the power of His promise, and he announces salvation: "Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance". And then everything is transformed: the desert blooms, consolation and joy take possession of the lost of heart, the lame, the blind, the mute are healed. This is what is realized with Jesus: "The blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them".

This description shows us that salvation envelops the whole person and regenerates him. But this new birth, with the joy that accompanies it, always presupposes a death to ourselves and to the sin within us. Hence the call to conversion, which is the basis of the preaching of both the Baptist and Jesus; in particular, it is a question of converting our idea of God. And the time of Advent stimulates us to do this precisely with the question that John the Baptist poses to Jesus: "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?". We think: all his life John waited for the Messiah; his lifestyle, his very body is shaped by this expectation. This is also why Jesus praises him with those words: no one is greater than him among those born of a woman. Yet he too had to convert to Jesus. Like John, we too are called to recognize the face that God chose to assume in Jesus Christ, humble and merciful.

Advent is a time of grace. It tells us that it is not enough to believe in God: it is necessary to purify our faith every day. It is a matter of preparing ourselves to welcome not a fairy-tale character, but the God who challenges us, involves us and before whom a choice is imposed. The Child who lies in the manger has the face of our brothers and sisters most in need, of the poor who are "a privileged part of this mystery; often they are the first to recognize God's presence in our midst" (Apostolic Letter *Admirabile signum*, 6).

May the Virgin Mary help us so that, as we approach Christmas, let us not allow ourselves to be distracted by external

things, but make room in our hearts for the One Who has already come and Who wishes to come again to heal our illnesses and to give us His joy.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 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?
- 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'?
- 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.