

Second Sunday of Advent – Extraordinary Form
Ave Maria Catholic Church, Sunday December 5, 2021

Rom. 15: 4-13

For whatever was written previously was written for our instruction, that by endurance and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to think in harmony with one another, in keeping with Christ Jesus, that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Welcome one another, then, as Christ welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I say that Christ became a minister of the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, to confirm the promises to the patriarchs, but so that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written: "Therefore, I will praise you among the Gentiles and sing praises to your name." And again, it says: "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people." And again: "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him." And again, Isaiah says: "The root of Jesse shall come, raised up to rule the Gentiles; in him shall the Gentiles hope." May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Mt 11: 2-10

When John heard in prison of the works of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to him with this question, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?" Jesus said to them in reply, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them. And blessed is the one who takes no offense at me." As they were going off, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John, "What did you go out to the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? Then what did you go out to see? Someone dressed in fine clothing? Those who wear fine clothing are in royal palaces. Then why did you go out? To see a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written: 'Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you; he will prepare your way before you.'

John the Baptist's Message

Second Sunday of Advent - Romans 15: 4-13 / Mt 11: 2-10
Ave Maria Catholic Church, December 5, 2021 - Fr. David M Vidal

The Gospel on this Second Sunday of Advent introduces the figure of John the Baptist.

Who is John the Baptist? Who can better define who John the Baptist is than Christ himself? After some messengers of John left, Jesus speaking to the crowds asks: *“What did you go out to the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? Then what did you go out to see? Someone dressed in fine clothing?”* (Mt 11: 7-8).

Jesus Christ presents these questions rhetorically. It was a well-known fact that John the Baptist did not sway like a reed in the wind, but he was a righteous man, a lover of truth who was not afraid to say to Herod: *“It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife,”* (Mk. 6: 18). Certainly, John was not like a reed swaying in the wind. He was not someone dressed in fine garments either. Those who dress in fine garments live in palaces. As it happened in time, John was in a palace, but in the jail of that palace, ready to give his life for the truth he proclaimed.

Now, Jesus keeps asking: *“Then why did you go out? To see a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written: ‘Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you; he will prepare your way before you.’”* (Mt 11: 9-10).

Now, this is how John the Baptist defines himself: Some priests and Levites from Jerusalem asked John the Baptist: *“Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?”*

John the Baptist replies: *“I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.”* (John 1: 19-ff)

John the Baptist is a Voice crying for Conversion

On the banks of the Jordan River John preached a baptism of repentance, and many people “were going out to him from Jerusalem, all Judea, and the whole region around the Jordan. They were being baptized by him as they confessed their sins.” (Mt 3:5-6).

The baptism of John demanded repentance for their own sins and a sincere expectation of the Messiah. The baptism of John was not just a ritual gesture, an external or superficial act, or a social event, but it was a real demand for conversion. Conversion (*metanoia*) means change. It is a change of mind, but especially a change of heart. This is the Christian meaning of conversion present in the Gospel. It is the radical change of mind and heart that places a person on the road of holiness.

John the Baptist was absolutely clear about that. People were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they acknowledged their sins. And when many of the Pharisees and Sadducees came to his baptism, he said to them: “*You brood of vipers! . . . Produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance.*” (Matthew 3: 6–8). In other words, do not pretend to purify your image with an act that does not reflect what is in your heart!

Conversion is an event located at the crossroads of two mysteries: the mystery of freedom, and the mystery of divine mercy, infinitely greater than our sins. God calls us to live a life of holiness. God invites us to receive his mercy. He does not force us. Conversion is and will always be a free act. At the same time, conversion requires the act of the merciful God who comes to meet us, who offers his mercy, and who works in our souls gently, without force.

For this reason, John the Baptist not only presents the need for conversion, and the necessity of our free answer to the call, but also points out Jesus Christ, the one who brings about the act of conversion in our souls.

John the Baptist is the Voice that leads us to Jesus

John the Baptist bears witness to Jesus: “*The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said: ‘Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, after me comes a man who ranks before me, for he was before me.’*” (Jn 1: 29–30).

Here is the Word of God, who became flesh. This is the first and fundamental mystery of Jesus Christ. God had never been so close to us – and we had never been so close to God – as in the precise moment of the Incarnation. And John the Baptist points out that person, our Lord Jesus: “*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*” This is the complete truth concerning the Messiah-Redeemer.

In Jesus was fulfilled perfectly the figure of the “paschal lamb,” the victim offered to God so that, in the sign of its blood, the firstborn of the Hebrews might be saved (See: Ex 12:21-27). John the Baptist recognizes in Jesus the true “Lamb of God” (Jn 1:29); the innocent lamb who took upon himself the sin of the world in order to immerse it in the saving waters of the Jordan (See: Mt 3:13-16 and parallels); the meek lamb “led to the slaughter, like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,” (Is 53:7).

And Jesus is the eternal victim. Risen from the dead and glorified at the right hand of the Father, he preserves in his immortal body the marks of the wounds of his nailed hands and feet, of his pierced heart (See: Jn 20:27; Lk 24:39-40) and presents them to the Father in a continual prayer of intercession on our behalf, (See: Heb 7:25; Rom 8:34).

Who is Lord who comes to us? In St. Matthew's Gospel, John the Baptist describes the person, the mission, and the authority of the Messiah.

John the Baptist clearly pictures the "person" when he says: "*He is more powerful than I. I am not even fit to carry his sandals*" (Matthew 3:11). With this typically Eastern expression, he acknowledges the infinite distance that lies between him and the One who is to come.

Afterwards, John points out the mission of the Messiah: "He will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and fire" (Matthew 3:11). This is the first time since the Angel's announcement to Mary that there appears the striking expression "Holy Spirit," which will then become part of Jesus' fundamental Trinitarian teaching. John the Baptist announces that Jesus, the Messiah, will continue to confer baptism, but this rite will give God's "grace," by the action of the Holy Spirit, who cancels (burns away) our sins with a mystical "fire" and incorporates us into the divine life itself.

Finally, the Baptist clarifies the authority of the Messiah: "*His winnowing - fan is in his hand. He will clear the threshing floor and gather his grain into the barn, but the chaff he will burn in unquenchable fire*" (Matthew 3:12). According to John's teaching, the One who is to come is the "judge of consciences;" in other words, He is the one who distinguishes truth and error, establishes what is good and what is evil, and separates the grain and the chaff. He determines which trees bear good fruit and which bear bad fruit and must be cut down and burned!

Let us listen to that voice crying out in the desert of humanity. That voice also speaks to us, that voice tells us that we too need to accept the call of conversion, and welcome Jesus, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. Amen.