

The Message of John the Baptist

From the time of Malachi, who lived more than 400 years before Jesus Christ, there had been no other prophets in Israel. So imagine the joy of the Jewish people when it learned that a messenger from God had come to break that long silence. And that messenger was John the Baptist, the last of the Old Testament prophets, he who travelled the valley of the Jordan to announce that the Messiah, so longed for, was there in their midst. And to all who came to listen to him he said that the Messiah was close at hand and that they must prepare to welcome Him.

So the Gospel tells us of John the Baptist's vocation, saying that the word of the Lord was addressed to him in the desert. Now, from the beginning of his ministry John the Baptist summoned everyone to repent, to penance and to prayer. And saint Luke quotes to us the words of Isaiah who foretold John the Baptist, figuratively, saying: "A voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight his paths. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low.'"

Those words of Isaiah indicate to us the obstacles we must overcome if we want to open the way of the Lord. Thus it was that many people heeded the words of John the Baptist and asked of him the Baptism of conversion and penance. Among the ones who accepted his preaching and followed his counsels were those who, a few months later, would accept the Messiah and all His

teaching.

And now John the Baptist's message is also addressed to us in this time of Advent. For there is no doubt that we also will see salvation if we prepare our heart for it, if we consent to open the eyes of faith in listening to the voice that cries out in the desert of our soul, that sometimes seems empty of God, whereas the Lord is living in us. And it is thus that we shall see God's salvation.

And it is so that we may prepare ourselves for the second coming of Christ that the Church transmits once again to us the message of John the Baptist. It is for us to show ourselves capable of listening attentively to it, of welcoming it, as did the throngs that gathered on the shores of the Jordan to listen to the message John the Baptist delivered to them, and this to the end that we also may profit from the imminent coming of Christ, King of the universe.

For the reign of Christ will only establish itself in our soul if the soul is prepared to receive it. So, let us follow the counsels of John the Baptist; let us prepare the way for the Lord in order that He may come to reign in our soul athirst for God. For that, we must make straight our intentions and our conduct, just as we must banish our pride and egoism. We must likewise rectify our distorted judgments, smooth out the asperity of our character and, finally, fill in the ravines of our heart empty of ideals, generosity, love of God and neighbor.

Consequently, the need for interior reform. The time of Advent is precisely a

time of conversion. And the will to beat down obstacles is something indispensable if we want to obtain salvation from God. So Advent is a time of penance, and only an authentic repentance of our sins obtains pardon for us.

The obstacles in us that bar the way to the Lord are often numerous, both those interior and those exterior, and they impede in us a clear vision of our moral life perverted by the spirit of the world. Unfortunately, too many Christians no longer know what is right and what is wrong in their life. And how many priests there are who are no longer prepared to give to the faithful the authentic doctrine of Christ! Well, such behavior can only sow confusion in souls.

And because our faith is not firm enough we risk losing courage and confidence in God. And yet we know very well that God is our only source of salvation. It is He who promises us peace, happiness and glory in spite of all our weaknesses, provided we have the strength to return to Him in order to ask pardon of Him.

The liturgy of the second Sunday of Advent assures us that the Lord is soon going to realize for us all that He has already announced to Jerusalem which is a figure of the Church and of each soul. And what he has done for Jerusalem prefigures what He has to do for His Church and for each one of us. But for that He is waiting for us to place in Him alone all our confidence.

So, as the Psalmist suggests to us: "Let us place our hope in the Lord who always sustains us, and we will not be disappointed."

Father Victor Rizzi

GOD IS MY STRENGTH, MY SONG

The more we advance along the road leading us to Christmas, the more numerous are the invitations to joy in the biblical readings and the liturgical prayers that ring out like a carillon announcing already the great joy of Christmas night: "Rejoice in the Lord always!"

It is difficult, humanly speaking, for a person undergoing a painful trial to receive such an invitation without being a little put out by it. So we have to understand that Saint Paul is not urging us to an exuberant joy – for it is possible to be naturally joyous and yet be scarcely spiritual –, but to a joy of a supernatural character based on faith and love.

It goes without saying that virtue does not suppress common sense or thoughtfulness of heart. Saint Paul was a realist, very aware of the multiple dramas and tribulations with which we are confronted. He did not live on a cloud and does not encourage anyone to do so. On the contrary, he also exhorts us to "weep with those who weep" (Rom 12:15) and to "help carry one another's

burdens" (Gal 6:2).

All the same, he wants us to share in the hope that dwelt in him and that, for him, remained an unending source of joy. Because he experienced the Lord's love, he can tell us across the centuries: "Rejoice, for the Lord is near." To be sure, that means that Christ is about to come, but it has more the meaning that He is close to each person, for He made Himself into a little child, born of a woman, in order to share in our human condition, down to the tiniest details of our daily life. Christ affirms in the "Beatitudes" that He is particularly attentive to the poor, those who weep, the afflicted.

This invitation to joy, under every circumstance, is rooted also in the certainty that each passing day draws us closer to the Lord in that encounter in which the joy of God, in a streaming of light, will forever fill to overflowing the hearts of His children which we are.

Since that is how we are as believers, the worry and even the anguish of each day can continue to try us,

and yet we know that the horizon is not closed, as it would have been if Jesus had not come to conceal Himself in our humanity in order to enable it to participate in His death and resurrection in glory. Thanks to the coming of Jesus we can joyfully proclaim with Saint Paul that "the sufferings of this time are not worthy to be compared with the glory to come, that shall be revealed in us" (Rom 8:18).

Like unto all that is grand, beautiful and beneficial – such as life, love, peace – joy is a gift of God, a radiation of His Being: God is Joy. And that is why Saint Paul is so firmly explicit: "Rejoice in the Lord always!" But even before Saint Paul, Isaiah called the people of God to always live in hope and joy: "God is my strength, my song" (Is 12:2).

However, it is not a matter of celebrating our own joy, even though our human joys may be perfectly legitimate and good; a sound understanding of our existence always includes, humanly, a certain sense of joy, that is to say, of that joy in living that

brightens our daily life; but if that were all there was we would soon be creating pleasure at any price, falling into a permanent state of diversion and into a false conception of existence that would consist in spurning all suffering and, by that very fact, becoming incapable of coming to grips with it.

Now, the right way to meet with suffering and all that weight of existence we feel is to remember that the joy that comes to us at Christmas is not an emanation from our humanness, but a gift that truly comes from God. This call to joy is the way God really gives Himself to us.

If there is one thing that is often forgotten in the world of today and in our own existence, it is the proximity of God in our life, the fundamental meaning of our existence as a Christian which consists in really receiving God, not God as an idea or in poetry, but God for what He is, God who gives Himself as Love, God who comes to renew us in order that we may live by His love and for His love.

Preparing for Christmas is all that; it is renewing our outlook, not based on all the satisfactions we might be able to invent for ourselves, such as the "tinsel-Christmas" or the "showy-Christmas", but on the very simple Christmas of joy that gushes from the depths of the heart and that consists in contemplating that God who comes to us as an infant that is

Love. Joy is precisely an effect of charity, of that love which is God present in us.

Let us rejoice, for God is here, in the Sacrament of Charity that we are going to receive shortly. Now, it is from charity that all sanctification flows. Without it we would be nothing but sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal (1 Cor 13:1). Charity has nothing of the natural, just as

Christ's cross has nothing of the comfortable. From this we can understand that the joy of the Christian has little in common with an untroubled life or a life of sentimentality.

Mary experienced, more than anyone else, that joy which is born of true love. The spiritual life of Mary was a life of prayer, of contact with her Lord in the light of

charity and in the night of faith. By virtue of this she was, as Saint Paul recommends, always joyful in the Lord (cf. Phil 4:4). But that joy in her life impregnated with God also met with anxieties and trials, all the more so in that the spiritual life consists in the love of God made concretely manifest in the acceptance of His divine will.

Father Maurice Péloquin