

HOMILY SUNDAY ADVENT 3-A

“Unwavering Joyful Faith”

(Isaiah 35:1-6, 10; Psalm 146; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11)

“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

Pray for unwavering faith in Jesus that expresses itself in love and joy.

The first reading exposes why John the Baptist would even think of asking that question of Jesus. The prophet Isaiah proclaims two different promises of God. On the one hand, we are told that that God will come with a vengeance, with terrible recompense. That is how God will save us. But before and after that promise, we are told that the desert land shall rejoice and bloom, and that the ransomed of the Lord shall return with everlasting joy. There are two different versions of the future here. Which is easier to believe? Which is the one we lean towards when things do not go our way?

To illustrate this point, when I was a grade nine student at St Thomas College in North Battleford, Sask., a rumour swirled around the school all day that there was going to be a big fight after school behind the Playdium between two of the students. Curious, I went to see and sure enough there were at least a hundred boys gathered around two grade twelve students. They took off their shirts to the coaxing and urging of many in the crowd. As the tension mounted, they stepped towards each other, bobbed and weaved for a few moments, then abruptly shook each others hands and gave each other a hug. They were best of friends. It was a trick, a hoax. The reaction of many of the crowd was interesting and even scary. While some were relieved, many booed the boys, disappointed that there was no fight.

There is a dark tendency in human beings whose faith is weak. We tend to take things in our own hands, to try to hasten developments, to determine the course of history our way. This happens especially when God does not act the way we want God to act.

Lucie in the cartoon Peanuts exemplifies this dilemma. Over and over we see episodes where she assures Charlie Brown of her loyalty and trustfulness. She then sets him up to take some action, such as running to kick a ball, only to pull it away at the last moment and taunting him for trusting her. Many times we think and feel that God, like Lucie, has let us down, has not answered our prayers.

Barbara Brown Taylor, in her book *Gospel Medicine*, has a homily entitled “The Silence of God.” In it she quotes Isaiah: “Why do we fast and you do not see? Why humble ourselves but you do not notice?” Then she adds her own questions: “Why do we worship, but you do not reveal yourself to us? Why do we pray, Sunday after Sunday, for peace, for health, for safety, but you do not give us those things? Why is the world so far from our desires for it, and why don’t you speak – loudly and clearly – so that whole world can hear?” God’s silence is stunning, she remarks.

That seeming absence of God is the dilemma of John the Baptist, and that is the dilemma of our modern world today. Many when faced with this silence of God resort to violence. We are all too familiar with the violence of fundamentalists on both sides of the spectrum – either the Muslim suicide bomber destroying hundreds of innocent lives in the name of Allah, or the Christian activist who, in the name of Jesus, shoots a doctor who performs abortions. There is even a strain in American politics of the religious right yearning for a nuclear war that would hasten the Armageddon.

What are we to make of this in the light of today's readings? The message is clear – pray for unwavering faith in Jesus, the Messiah, and the mysterious desert way that God is bringing about salvation. John the Baptist, even when in prison facing death, had to put up with the darkness of God. He had expected and preached a mighty one who would baptize with Spirit and fire. And now there appears in the Gospel this gentle One who “will not quench a smoldering wick.” And so he sends his disciples to ask Jesus the famous question: “Are you the one, or is there another?” Jesus calms John's disquiet by showing him that the prophecy is being fulfilled in himself, in gentle miracles that still call for trusting faith.

In the second reading, James invites us to have the faith of a farmer who is patient with his seeded crop that grows in a way that he does not understand. The Psalm invites us to make our own the constant strong cry: “Lord, come to save us.”

Biblical greatness is not achieving results - it is seen best in unwavering faith. John's greatness was not in his own faith but in the fact that he announced the coming of Jesus. Our greatness will lie in believing in Jesus and following him regardless of our circumstances. The presence of joy in our lives will be an unmistakable sign of biblical faith. That is why this third Sunday of Advent is called *Gaudate Sunday*, Joyful Sunday, as we celebrate the faith that John the Baptist had to announce the coming of Jesus as Messiah, and pray that our faith may be unwavering even in times of darkness.

One of the best examples of someone who had that kind of faith has to be Mother Theresa of Calcutta. She was seen as a saint during her lifetime, and people thought she must be enjoying all kinds of consolation from God. Now, after her death, a book of her letters reveals someone like John the Baptist, someone who struggled with darkness, doubt and dryness in prayer throughout the long years of her remarkable ministry. Therein lies the evidence of her faith – that she carried on that amazing ministry of love, despite the lack of felt consolation from God. Hers was truly unwavering faith, a faith that we need to study and pray for in our day of instant gratification and lust for external signs and results.

The Eucharist we celebrate today is itself a call for unwavering faith. Humble gifts of bread and wine are transformed through faith-full prayer into the Body and Blood of Jesus. And we who receive these humble gifts with faith are also transformed into the Body of Jesus, sent out to love unconditionally with unwavering faith.

So remember, faith is at its best when there seems to be no reason for faith. Pray this day for unwavering faith that will empower us to love and live joyfully this great mystery of the Messiah present and working in us and among us.