

## REPENTANCE IS THE HIGHWAY TO JOY

Malachi 3. 1-4  
Philippians 1. 3-11  
Luke 3. 1-6

I speak to you in the name of ✠ the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

We have just heard a gospel reading that ends with some words of one of the Old Testament prophets, Isaiah: “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”<sup>1</sup>

Isaiah wrote those words to encourage the people of Israel after everything had fallen apart for them. Southern Israel had already witnessed the destruction of her sister kingdom to the North, and what was left of Israel in the South was besieged by enemies on every side. In an effort to stave off invasion from one quarter, the Israelites forged alliances with first one, and then another nation, in hopes that this would save them; but these alliances kept proving to be untrustworthy. A recurring message throughout the book of Isaiah is to not trust in these man-made alliances, but to trust God, to walk in his ways, to be his people, so that he can prove himself to be faithful and trustworthy to them. But the people of Israel could not, or would not resist the temptation to align themselves with everyone but God. Despite God’s continual warnings that the nations would fail them and that the result would be destruction, the people persisted in going their own way until it all came tumbling down, literally.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Is 40. 3-5.

The particular ‘sin’ of Israel was they were unfaithful. But as we all know, ‘sin’ is more than just doing something bad; it is a human condition that breeds the bad things we often do. Both the condition and the individual actions work in opposition to God’s purposes. Repentance, on the other hand, is simply turning away from that condition of life, and the things we do in it that oppose God. And where do we turn to when we repent? We turn back towards God and his purposes. That’s what Isaiah kept exhorting the people to do: turn away from Egypt or Assyria or Babylon, and turn back to God.

In the end, Israel did not repent, and was conquered by the Babylonians. Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed. Not one stone was left upon another, and the people were carried away into exile. The prophets had warned them and warned them, begging them to please turn back to God. But the people did not heed the warnings, and they were destroyed at the hands of their enemies.

Yet the destruction was not total. There was a remnant of the nation that was preserved. Not in property, nor in terms of power, but a remnant of people. In the midst of this remnant, Isaiah raises a cry of hope, as one crying in a wilderness of despair; and he says, ‘All flesh shall see the salvation of God’.

In time, Israel was freed from exile was allowed to return to Jerusalem and rebuild her city and temple. National life resumed, but things were never really the same. Israel was never as powerful politically, militarily, or socially as she had been at her height under Kings David and Solomon. And so the centuries passed.

Some seven hundred years after Isaiah, Tiberius, an emperor who proclaimed himself a god, was ruling over a vast empire that had subsumed Israel. There were Herodian tetrarchs, puppet kings appointed by Rome who oversaw the territory. A Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, was also appointed, and he strove to keep order in a land

that was hostile to his empire's presence. Caiaphas and Annas, the high priests or chief pastors of the people, adhered to a philosophy of Judaism that denied the resurrection of the dead and the authority of scripture. Living in such a morass of megalomania, political oppression, incompetence and religious revisionism, one might have been tempted to put one's trust in any number of things and to establish loyalties and alliances in any number of quarters just to survive. The temptations must have been great.

It was in the midst of this complicated situation that a ray of hope appeared. A prophet came out of the desert with a familiar word from God, and he was preaching repentance for the remission of sins: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight...and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'

That prophet was John the Baptist, and he was sent by God (in answer to prayer) to go just ahead of God's own son, Jesus. John's vocation was to prepare the way and to help people get ready to meet our Lord. John did this by preaching; and the substance of his preaching was *repentance*. If the people were going to greet the coming of Christ with joy, then what was needed above all else was repentance from sin.

Repentance from sin means to forsake something that does us no good so that we can fall into the arms of the one who will do us every good. It is to change the condition of our lives, and to redirect our steps. But the fear that each of us has is that if we forsake something, or turn from it, walk away and leave it behind, even if it is separating us from God, will God be sufficient to replace the loss we will feel? We do not trust God to be sufficient; so we forge 'alliances' with all sorts of habits, addictions, behaviours and powers that we think will save us. But in the end they can only betray us and bring us to destruction.

At the beginning of this service, at the lighting of the Second Advent Candle, I led us in a prayer. The first part of this prayer acknowledged that God spoke to the world through the mouth of his prophets. The second part of the prayer stated that God now speaks to us through his Son, and that we are to walk in his light and to be found ready and waiting when he comes again.

This prayer articulates an essential bit of Christian work for Advent. During Advent, we proclaim the truth that our Lord is coming. Soon, we will celebrate Jesus's birth; and we will meet the babe in a manger. As Isaiah put it, 'all flesh shall see the salvation of God'. But even now the resurrected and living Christ sits at the right hand of God, and the Father has appointed a time when our Lord will come again in power and great glory. We, the Church, anticipate this appearing and we pray that God will hasten it.

And when Jesus comes again, how do we want to meet him? With joy and peace, of course. But that joy and peace must be born in our hearts; and for that to happen, there has to be room in our hearts for the joy and peace to take root. We make room for joy and peace by forsaking those things that crowd out the good and threaten to choke out Christ.

This Advent, may God enable us to turn towards him and leave all that clutters behind us. May the Lord come, finding us doing the daily good work of turning and turning and turning again. Even now, this morning, may we begin to forge a new alliance with God our Father, founded on our trust in his sufficient love for us. And may we continue to ask God in prayer to give us the grace to heed the prophets' warning, to forsake our sins, and to greet with joy the coming of our salvation in great power and majesty, even Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.