

Second Sunday of Advent

Year A

Is 11:1-10

Ps 72:1-2, 7-8, 12-13, 17

Rom 15:4-9

Mt 3:1-12

David A. Cregan, O.S.A.

A few days ago I spent the afternoon untangling lights at my mother's house that were put away last year with far too much haste and with no foresight to this year's use. After having completed the less than festive task of decorating the outside of her house I went next door to my brother's house where I met my four-year-old nephew who was having his lunch and watching TV. He was literally glued to Scooby Doo, and my attempts to engage him in conversation could not compete with the attraction of colorful animated characters engaged in hauntingly adventurous mysteries in need of solving.

It is remarkable to think how the most ordinary experiences of our human existence give us insight into our profound relationship with God. After struggling to gain my nephew's attention I literally stood in front of the TV, at which time he smiled at me and acknowledged my presence. Are we not like that child glued to the tasks of daily living and, more often than not, missing the subtle attempts that God makes to engage us? We become preoccupied with activity, with consumption, with anxiety, even with our struggles or pains, and fail to hear the voice of the Lord calling us to a moment of peace, a period of rest, an opportunity for grace.

And yet, in the midst of our human limitations and necessary distractions we are part of a Church which draws our attention away from the mundane and toward the Divine. Through the liturgical calendar and the seasons of grace which shape our spiritual lives we are offered alternative points of focus to which to give our attention; sacred days marked out to draw our attention away from the things which drain our life energy and towards the life-giving energy of that which gives our existence lasting meaning, the Divine.

Matthew's Gospel dramatically thunders out a call for better attention to the plan of God through the rather radical character of John the Baptist. John emphatically warns of the dangers of inattention to the Divine and over preoccupation with the diversions of the worldly. Though his call is affronting and aggressive it is a call to repentance. Repentance is itself a call to humility, acquiescence to the infinity of Divine Grace over our finite human frailty and stubborn egos. This invitation to repentance is an call to the opportunity for transformation and enlightenment. John's address to the religious leaders of his times is a reminder to us that as religious and priests we must continually attempt to place ourselves in unassuming positions of humility before God and others, when our social position attractively tempts us with places of honor and moments of thin superiority.

During this Advent time the excitement of the secular season is re-translated for us religiously by our carefully crafted scripture readings. The words of the Prophet Isaiah in today's first reading spark an anticipation of hope for a more perfect world as they create for us images of a Savior with "a spirit of wisdom and understanding", a Messiah who will "judge the poor with justice", and a God-with-us who will end division, dispel fear, and make life safe for all, not just the powerful. Isaiah details a God-made world, one which extends for us possibility at a time when many of us feel overwhelmed by the grave imbalances of power which dominate the man-made world in which we live.

St. Paul reinforces and extends Isaiah's Godly vision, calling for harmony in community. Inherent in this reading is the mandate that as followers of Christ we are called to "welcome one another", once again an invitation to humility over self-righteousness. It is only God who will bring about the perfection of the world envisioned by Isaiah, but as his disciples we are obliged to attempt to live out its possibility in our world. Paul brings together the vision of Isaiah and the repentance of John the Baptist to instruct us in good Christian living. We fall short in answering the call of God for our attention when we founder in our unrelenting hope for peace and an end to division, but we also fail when we refuse one another. Welcoming one another does not mean agreeing. Welcoming may not even mean liking. Welcoming is the humility to recognize one's own imperfection and thus compassionately accepting the shortcomings of another, it is honoring the Divine in ourselves and the Divine in others.

We must remind ourselves time and time again that this is God's work we are about, and God's work is always accompanied by His grace. It is grace that draws us and provides us the wisdom to pull ourselves away from the distractions of the world and towards God. It is grace that gifts us with self-knowledge and its concomitant companion humility. It is grace which allows us to recognize our own need for repentance, and it is grace which implants in us the hope for a world of justice and life without division.

As we light the second candle of the Advent Wreath let us pray for the grace of the season to guide attract us to its flame, guiding us to pay closer attention to the call of Lord and thus live with a deeper sense of meaning, a higher level of compassion, and a world-altering vision of hope. What more could one ask for this Christmas?