

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent - A  
Isaiah 11:1-10;  
Romans 15:4-9;  
Matthew 3:1-12  
Little Flower - 12/4/16

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today's Gospel introduces us to John the Baptist. During Advent, it is always good to reflect on John the Baptist and his mission and ministry.

John the Baptist had a unique role in salvation history. Because he was the last prophet of the Old Testament and the first prophet of the New Testament, he was the bridge between the two testaments. More importantly, he was the fulfillment of the words of the prophet Isaiah: "*A voice of one crying out in the desert: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.'*" Because he announced the impending arrival of the Lord, he is called the precursor, which means "one who runs ahead of."

John's message, however, was essentially the same message Jesus would proclaim, "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!*" The primary role of biblical prophets was not to foretell the future but to interpret and challenge the present. This is precisely what John the Baptist did in today's Gospel.

Today's readings offer us two important challenges. In today's Old Testament reading, Isaiah prophesies that the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon the messiah. He then enumerates what the Church now calls the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. These gifts of the Spirit were gifts not primarily for his personal benefit but for the benefit of his mission.

The Catholic Church teaches that we receive the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit when we are baptized and that these seven gifts are confirmed or strengthened when we receive the sacrament of confirmation. Likewise, these gifts are not just given to us for our personal benefit but to help us live out our vocation, our mission.

Just as Jesus and John the Baptist each had a unique part to play in salvation history, so do we. At our baptism and at our confirmation, we were anointed with chrism to signify the gift of the Holy Spirit and our consecration to the ministry and mission of Jesus. When I was growing up, our focus was almost entirely on achieving our own salvation. Today our focus must be on carrying on the ministry and mission of Jesus, i.e., proclaiming that the kingdom of God is close at hand and challenging ourselves and others to live the values of the kingdom. In other words, today's readings challenge us to be prophetic.

Today's reading from the Prophet Isaiah presents a beautiful picture of God's kingdom. It prophesies that the messiah will bring forth a kingdom of reconciliation and peace. Isaiah uses the image of animals living in harmony: the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the kid, the calf and the young lion, the cow and the bear, the lion and the ox, even the boy playing by the cobra's den, and the child laying his hand on the adder's lair. These are images that seem irreconcilable. In the kingdom of God, peace and harmony will reign. Jesus came into the world to reconcile us with God, others, ourselves, and our world. Therefore, we too are challenged to be instruments of peace and reconciliation.

Today's reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans suggests two concrete ways to promote harmony, peace, and reconciliation. Paul calls us to think in harmony with one another in keeping with Christ Jesus. In other words, the more we make our own the mind of Christ Jesus [Phil. 2:5], the more we will be united with God and one another. Second, he calls us to "*welcome one another...as Christ welcomed*" us. This means welcoming all people, even those who are very different from us, those not like us at all.

My brothers and sisters, to help us prepare to welcome Christ anew into our lives and hearts this Christmas, to tear down the walls and barriers that separate us from God and others, I would invite and encourage you to come to our Advent Penance Service this Monday evening at 7 p.m. here at Little Flower.