

GOD IS COMING TO CHANGE US: 2ND SUNDAY OF ADVENT C

When somebody in our lives is game enough or rude enough to point out something wrong with us, we may admit that it's true, but proceed to do nothing about it. Like the father who said to his daughter, *'we must have a little chat'*, to which she replied *'the only time we ever have a little chat is when you want to give me a lecture about something.'* *'Besides,'* she added, *'why is it that you always go away looking so good while I'm left feeling so miserable?'* He recognised that what she said about him was true, but doubted he was able to change.

We know from our own experiences that insight doesn't always lead to change. Owning up to the truth doesn't force us to change our ways. Particularly when our self-esteem takes a beating or a bashing, the truth can have the opposite effect. It can paralyse us. The realization of what change will involve may lead us to feel that it's all too much. We're too old, we think, or too set in our ways to be born again as a better person. Not now, we think, or at least not yet. Just like St Augustine who once prayed to God: *'Give me chastity and self-control but not yet.'* But that was before he changed his ways completely for the better!

In today's readings, four messengers of God encourage people to imagine that better future that God intends for them, and to live and act in harmony with it. Thus the prophet Baruch assures his people that God has not forgotten them. So he urges them to replace their garments of sorrow and distress with the cloak of God's promises, goodness and integrity. The psalmist asks his people to imagine a time when they will be exiles and slaves no longer, but go back home with joy, carrying the sheaves of grain harvested along the way. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul compliments the people for how they have helped him in his work, and urges them to prepare for the day *'when you will reach the perfect goodness'* that Jesus Christ will produce in them. Finally, John the Baptist urges his hearers to *'prepare a way for the Lord'*, to get ready for that day when all human beings will finally *'see the salvation of God'*, and experience his healing and transformation.

Notice that none of those four speakers confronts the people with the bare, unvarnished truth of what's wrong with them. That would only deepen their sense of weakness, inadequacy, and helplessness. Each messenger speaks a message of hope, encouragement, and affirmation. *'The times they are a-changing'* is what they say. God is near, God is coming. God is coming to change things. God is coming to give you a brand new start. No need to look back, then, only to look forward. *'So, seize the day,'* God's messengers say, *'that brand new day that God is offering you now.'* On their part the people hear: *'You can do it. You're not on your own. Your God is right beside you.'*

So all our readings today share this marvellous insight: - We begin to change when we are encouraged to see the best in ourselves, not when we are asked to dwell on the worst in ourselves. Simply telling people what's wrong with them may be like leaving them a train-wreck - feeling helpless, hopeless, and isolated, and with no one to care whether they change or not.

If we are to leave behind our bad and destructive ways, we don't need someone pouring poison and vitriol on our wounds, we need help and encouragement. We need help to imagine ourselves differently, and to imagine the good influence we will have on others by becoming better persons ourselves. We need time to reflect on what kind of person God wants us to be. We need greater faith in the power and love of God working in us to make us better than we are. We even need to become as certain as Paul was when he wrote *'that the One who began this good work in you will see that it is finished'*.

In our life-project of reaching our potential, our project of becoming the best person we can be, we also need others to prod us on: *'Go on! You can do it!'*, we need them to keep saying. In fact, we need to draw out the best in each other, just like Paul did with the people in his life, and rejoice with them in the changes they kept making. Paul himself was a *'wounded healer'* He had to make big changes in his own life, and it was his fellow human beings and fellow Christians who gave him the encouragement and support to achieve the big progress he did achieve. Not all at once, I might add, but gradually -one step at a time, slowly but surely!

'How the mighty have fallen!' we sometimes hear. That's certainly what we heard a while back about the world's greatest golfer at that time - Tiger Woods. But to his credit he owned up and took responsibility for what he called his *'transgressions'*. He also spoke clearly of his determination to change: *'I will strive to be a better person,'* he wrote on his website, *'and the husband and father my family deserves.'*

If our parish community is to be constantly converted to Christ, all of us have to both breathe in encouragement from others and breathe out encouragement to them. In our life-project to become the best person we can be, it may help to remember those famous words of Blessed John Henry Newman: *'To be human is to change. To be perfect is to have changed often.'*

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