

PREPARING THE WAY OF THE LORD: 2ND SUNDAY ADVENT B

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A brand new priest went to the lectern to preach his first homily after ordination. He was as nervous as a kitten. But when he reached the lectern he broke into a broad smile. Someone had left a note for him. *'What's it to be, man? Will you give us heaven or hell?'* Well, I like to give the gospel, i.e. good news from God, news on God's authority, news of hope and encouragement. The news that our God is with us and is changing us for the better, to get us ready for the Second Coming of Jesus!

Of course, for God to be present to us and influence our choices requires our cooperation. John the Baptizer, God's main messenger to us today, tells us what this includes. It includes repentance, first and foremost. This is more than true sorrow for our sins. True repentance requires change, an about-face in the ways we think about ourselves and in how we relate to other people. True repentance, in fact, requires a thorough-going change in the ways we think, feel, value, speak, act and live. It involves nothing less than taking on the mind and heart of Jesus. True repentance, John also says, demands outward signs of inward change. So he tells his hearers to show their repentance by getting their sins washed away in the River Jordan, and to get a life, a new life, a new and better way of living.

So, preparing the way of the Lord requires our cooperation with the action of God in us. Unlike me, many of you are mothers and fathers. You know what it's like to prepare for the arrival of a new baby. A room has to be cleaned out of all useless junk. It has to be washed or wiped clean from top to bottom. Usually a new coat of paint has to be applied or new wall-paper. A blind to keep the sun out of Baby's face has to be hung, and pretty curtains put up to decorate the space. A bassinette, a cot, a pram and a stroller, must all be nearby. Fresh, soft baby clothes must greet Baby's arrival. Maybe some soft toys must be added, and some shapes hung from the ceiling to capture Baby's attention and to amuse him or her. There are simply so many things to do.

In ancient times, preparing for the visit of a king to one of his cities or towns would be just as demanding. The king would send a courier to the citizens to tell them to mend their roads, fill in the pot-holes and smooth out the bumps, so that the king's journey in his chariot might be as pleasant and trouble-free as possible.

It's this image that Mark uses to describe the mission of John the Baptist. To the hundreds of people flocking to him on the banks of the River Jordan from both town and country he says: *'The King is coming, so mend your lives, and mend them now.'*

So today, as the days draw closer to our celebration of Christ's first coming into the world at Bethlehem and to that day when he will come to earth again at the end of time, we have a

double task: - 1. to rejoice and give thanks that we do not save ourselves, but that Jesus, the Son of God is coming to save us, and 2. With the help of his powerful presence to us, his powerful grace, to fill in those potholes, level out those bumps, and remove those road-blocks, that are getting in the way of God's saving, transforming, changing and renewing us for the better.

What are those road-blocks, those obstacles to hearing and heeding the messenger of God crying out to us today: *'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight?'* In your case, surely you know what they are. In my case, I think I know what they are.

So, let our holy communion with Jesus Christ today be a prayer, a heart-felt prayer for that day of days when he will come fully and finally into our lives, a prayer that echoes the one we are praying together in our Responsorial Psalm today: *'Lord, let us see your kindness, and grant us your salvation.'*

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