

Holy Spirit Province

PROVINCIAL NEWSLETTER

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RENEWING OUR LOVE: 3RD SUNDAY ADVENT A

For ten years I was a member of a team in Sydney that conducted weekends for engaged couples. It was called 'Catholic Engaged Encounter'. The team consisted of a senior married couple, a junior married couple and a priest. Those live-in weekends were a form of intensive preparation for Marriage and worked well. One of the topics addressed was called 'Love is a decision'.

The start of the relationship that leads to marriage is usually falling in love. In the process the man and the woman experience a deep attraction to each other, discover what they like and love about each other, think the other is 'wonderful', 'marvellous', even 'awesome' and 'adorable', and are bubbling with excitement about each other. As time goes on, however, feelings of romance are frequently followed by feelings of disillusionment. Their ardour cools. They begin to take each other for granted. They discover faults and flaws. They get impatient, grumpy and angry with each other. They start to blame each other and snap at each other when things go wrong. They are no longer completely contented and relaxed in each other's company. They begin to give less and less time to each other.

A situation of disillusionment has developed, and it has to be resolved. In short, they must RENEW their love. So the experienced married couple on the team offers some valuable strategies to revive romance when disillusionment starts to set in. They especially stress how love is a decision, much more than feelings.

It seems that romance followed by disillusionment is part of a broader pattern of relationships. In today's gospel story, John the Baptist in his prison cell is disillusioned with Jesus. John had announced the wrath of God. He had said that God's axe was already lying at the root of the tree. He had said that sinners were going to be separated from the just and destroyed with fire. They were going to be discarded in the same way as the chaff is blown away from the wheat when the harvest is in full swing. John has heard, however, that Jesus is making no such threats, While he is calling on everyone to repent, he is not scaring people into repentance. Instead he has kept stressing God's invitation to come back to him 'with all your heart'. Jesus insists that God is offering not just a full pardon, but a close friendship, and with his friendship all the help and strength a person needs to keep doing the right thing and to keep avoiding evil.

It would appear that John is also disillusioned with the lifestyle of Jesus. He, John, has been a monk, an ascetic, all his adult life. He has lived in the desert, has worn animal skins, has fed on insects, and has drunk swampy water. But he has heard that Jesus doesn't go in for those kinds of penances and mortifications. On the contrary, Jesus is always going out to

dinner, mixing with all kinds of doubtful people, even with tax agents for the Roman occupiers. and sometimes even with prostitutes. He's not particularly pious either. At times his disciples don't bother to wash their hands before eating, and Jesus lets them get away with it.

So, as John languishes in the damp, darkness and depression of his prison cell, he's getting more and more fed up with Jesus, more and more disillusioned. He even doubts that Jesus can be the promised Messiah, the promised Saviour, after all. To resolve his doubts, he sends a couple of his own men to Jesus and confronts him with the question: 'Look, you don't fit my identikit picture. So, tell me straight, are you the Messiah or not?'

Jesus does not take offence at John's weakening faith in him. But he does not give him a direct answer. He tells the messengers to tell John to check out his credentials by reflecting on all the things that Jesus is doing. See for yourself! See how they all fit the pattern promised by the prophets, Isaiah especially! 'The blind see again, and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, and the Good News is proclaimed to the poor.' Jesus is saying in other words: 'Look, my friend, the wilderness is changing, the desert is blooming, darkness is giving way to brightness, joy and gladness are replacing sadness. The healing power and compassion of God are present in all the good things I've been doing. GOD'S CREATION IS BEING RENEWED, and everything I'm doing is giving praise and glory to God.' Jesus even adds a very gentle 'dig' at John when he quips: 'And happy is the man who does not lose faith in me!'

On the other hand, Jesus shows loudly and clearly that he has not lost any faith in John, is not the least disillusioned with John. In fact, he pays him the highest tribute: 'I tell you ... of all the children born of women, no greater than John the Baptist has ever been seen.' Just think about it! There's certainly nothing wishy-washy, nothing vacillating about John. He's no reed swaying this way and that in the breeze. Did he not confront King Herod to his face with the truth? The woman you seduced and married, he said, is not your lawful wife! There's nothing namby-pamby about John either. Not for him the life of a courtier in some royal palace, bowing down dozens of times a day before the petty potentates coming and going! No! John is the last of the First Testament prophets and the greatest. Over and over again he speaks the truth of God clearly and eloquently, speaks it without fear or favour. And he has paid the price for doing so by being slammed into prison where any day now the command will come from the king: 'Off with his head!'

In the light of today's gospel message, where do you and I stand in regard to our faith and hope in Jesus? One hears of more and more people dropping out of active membership in his community of followers. Of course, they will join us for Christmas, but after that they'll go their own way. I didn't say 'their own sweet way', because a life without Jesus Christ can be a pretty empty, lonely, superficial, unsatisfactory, unfulfilled, even bitter kind of life. Perhaps right now our faith in Christ is under some strain. Perhaps life in his community has not been as rewarding and helpful as we had hoped. Perhaps some of his followers have let us down. Perhaps some of our priests have let us down. Perhaps our prayers seem to have gone unanswered lately, and we fear we've just been talking to ourselves, and not to God at all.

Whatever the reason, let's remember that Jesus is the reason for the season, this season of Advent/Christmas, this season of hope, this time of RENEWAL! In our Holy Communion with him today, then, let us commit ourselves to not only saying but also really and truly meaning that prayer we will share: 'Lord, I am not worthy to receive you; but only say the word, and my soul [i.e. I myself] shall be healed.' Healed to walk the walk, and not just talk the talk!

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