

GOOD NEWS FROM GOD: 2ND SUNDAY ADVENT A

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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?'* To speak for myself, I like to share the gospel, i.e. good and joyful news from God, news we have on God's authority, news of hope and news of encouragement. The good news that our God is with us! The good news that our God is preparing us for Christ's Second Coming! The good news that our God is changing us for the better! The good news of our hope expressed in our response to our Psalm today: *'Justice shall flourish in his time, and fullness of peace for ever.'*

Of course, the action of God for a better world, for a just and peaceful society, for a new state of paradise where wolf and lamb, calf and lion-cub live together, feed together, and play together, requires our cooperation. John, God's messenger today, tells us what our cooperation includes. More than anything, it includes repentance. To the crowds coming out to see and hear him he says over and over again, *'Repent.'* In other words, *'get ready for the coming of the Messiah. Give up your selfishness, your greed, your self-indulgence, your dishonesty, your disloyalty, your anger, your nastiness, and your hostility.'* In a word, *'clean up your act.'*

True repentance, John insists, requires practical results. So he says bluntly: *'If you are repentant, produce the appropriate fruit.'* Repentance, then, is much more than sorrow for our sins, even for the best of motives. Full repentance requires a change of heart and a change of lifestyle. It requires a thoroughgoing turn-around in how we think, value, feel, speak, act and live. For Paul it means specifically: *'treat each other in the same friendly way as Christ has treated you.'* It involves nothing less, in fact, than taking on the mind and heart of Jesus.

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 wallpaper. 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 bassinet, a cot, a pram and a stroller, must be provided. Fresh, soft baby clothes must await Baby's arrival. Maybe some soft toys must be added to the scene, and some shapes hung from the ceiling to capture Baby's attention and to keep him/her amused. There is so much to be done.

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

It is this image that Matthew uses to describe the mission of John the Baptist. The word of God that comes to him as a prophet, as a messenger of God crying out in the desert, amounts to this: *'Your King is coming. So mend your lives, as thoroughly as you would mend your roads for the visit of your King.'*

For our celebrations during Advent and Christmas, both of our King's first coming at Christmas and of our hope in his Second Coming at the end of time, you and I have a double task:- 1. To rejoice and give thanks that we do not save ourselves, but that our God is coming to save us, and 2. With the help of our gracious God, to fill in those potholes, level out those bumps, remove those road-blocks, that are hindering God's work of saving, transforming, changing and renewing us.

What might those bumps in the road be? Of some of them, at least, you and I are well aware. But today, I'd like to raise an issue that is deeply dividing, an issue on which up to 78% of people may be opposing the will and way of God. It is an issue about which too many of us are not sufficiently aware, or not sensitive enough to, all the facts. I refer to the desperate situation of people seeking a safe haven in our prosperous country. I'm talking about people fleeing cruel dictatorships, torture, persecution and hunger in their countries of origin. Somehow or other, with all this happening, and with so much emphasis on *'the integrity of our borders,'* these desperate people have been demonized. They've been referred to, not just as *'illegals,'* not just as *'queue-jumpers,'* but as *'low-lives,'* *'runaway criminals,'* and worst of all, *'international vermin.'*

This is shocking. This is appalling. This is inhuman. Surely to speak and think and act this way is to forget one of the most touching of all the Christmas stories, the Flight into Egypt. Surely this is to forget this story of Jesus and his parents as refugees and asylum seekers, fleeing for their lives from the murderous cruelty of King Herod!

If we are to truly celebrate the birthday of the Saviour of the World, the plight of these fellow human beings pleading '*Save us*', '*Protect us*', '*Take us in*', '*Give us a home*', '*Let us live*', has to find a humane, a compassionate and a generous response!