

Synodal Journeys towards Jerusalem and the Jordan River

Second Sunday of Advent – Cycle C – 5 December 2021

Readings: Bar 5:1-9; Phil 1:3-6, 8-11; Lk 3:1-6.

“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low” (Lk 3:4-5)

Homily Hint: Advent is a time of preparation to welcome Jesus anew into our lives and into our world.

Despite the darkness, sin and evil we see within us and around us, there is hope if we are ready for repentance, prepared to ‘straighten out’ the crooked paths and experience the salvation promised by God. Baruch and John have Jerusalem and the River Jordan as reference-points, calling for conversion and cleansing in order to experience journeying as God’s people, cleansed and whole.

Jerusalem and Jordan Calling for Cleansing and Conversion:

1. John the Baptist is always associated with the River Jordan and the call to repentance. The gospel passage begins with a very specific temporal, spatial and historical segment, namely, the year 28/29 AD, in the fifteenth year of the reign of Roman Emperor, Tiberius Caesar. Luke also mentions the religious powers of the time. Although there is supposed to be only one High Priest officiating as Head of the temple, we have two names—Annas and Caiphas. In actual fact, Caiphas was the High Priest but Annas, his father-in-law, was influential in sociopolitical and religious affairs. John begins his ministry of calling people to repentance in the midst of a complex mixture of forces, both, good and evil, liberative and oppressive. It is precisely these forces that Jesus will encounter in his own journeying. The washing in the Jordan is symbolic of an inner cleansing. When a king visited any area, the surroundings were cleaned and all the rough roads were leveled so as to facilitate the smooth movement of the royal visitor’s caravans, camels and horses. John’s call to “prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight” (v.4) echoes the First Testament’s prophets’ predictions of the Messiah. John the Baptist is central to Advent for two reasons: (a) John calls for repentance and (b) He is what one might call a ‘pointer’ who points out to The Christ who is to come. John is the last prophet of Old Testament salvation. Henceforth, after his ‘pointing out’ is accomplished, Jesus will increase and he will decrease (Jn 3:30), ushering in the salvation of the New Testament, the New Jerusalem. Jordan is significant in Jesus’ journeying because at the start of his ministry, he will descend into the Jordan in order to express his solidarity with sinful humanity.
2. John is associated with spiritual cleansing at the River Jordan and, in the first reading, Baruch—who was a friend and secretary of Jeremiah—has Jerusalem as his point of reference. Jeremiah and Baruch had both lived in a time of darkness and death, having witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar and the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judah being taken captive to Babylon. Amidst this state of sadness and darkness, Baruch foretells redemption and points out to a bright future, pregnant with hope and promise. His words evoke eager expectation among the exiled Israelites. The language is poetic and full of promise: “Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem, and put on forever the beauty of the glory from God. Put on the robe of the righteousness that comes from God; put on your head the diadem of the glory of the Everlasting” (vv.1,2).

3. Baruch is pointing out to a hopeful future to one elect people, the Israelites, in one holy city, Jerusalem, which means ‘city of peace’. God will call Jerusalem “peace of righteousness and glory of godliness”. At present, the city is totally destroyed and in ruins, but there is reason to rejoice because God’s salvation is at hand (indicating more than just a physical return). The “children gathered from the west and east” are citizens of the New Jerusalem, which will no longer be exclusive but embrace everyone “carried in glory, as on a royal throne.” The reference to ‘glory’ and ‘royal throne’ is indicative of the people being regarded as sons and daughters of God, thereby, as their being princes and princesses. All this has nothing to do with their merit, for they have sinned against God and neighbour. Hence, “mercy and righteousness come from him”; i.e., God. The passage has a very positive tone despite being addressed to a people in shame and a city in shambles. The mention that “God has ordered that every high mountain and the everlasting hills be made low and the valleys filled up, to make level ground, so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God” indicates God journeying with people towards their safety and salvation.

Paul calling his people to discernment:

In the second reading, Paul writes to his beloved Christians of Philippi, while he was probably still in prison, commending them for helping “to spread the Good News from the day you first heard it right up to the present.” Paul rejoices that they are living good Christ-like lives and wants them to grow in: (a) deeper knowledge of God, (b) love for each other, and (c) *discernment* of what is best for them. For Paul, discernment is essential in order to choose what is right—so as to walk, blameless, before God and be “filled with the fruit of righteousness” (v.11).

The responsorial psalm (125) echoes the same sentiments of the first reading and is a fitting response to it: “What marvels the Lord worked for us! Indeed, we were glad.” There is an intermingling of the streams of joy and sorrow, laughter and tears as God journeys with the exiled people back like harvesters who “come back, full of song, carrying their sheaves.”

Pope Francis’ homily on John the Baptist: “John the Baptist knew that his gift for speaking, preaching, moving people’s hearts and attracting a crowd had a purpose that had nothing to do with him and everything to do with Jesus. He is a model for evangelizing. He demonstrates that a Christian does not proclaim himself or herself, but another, and prepares the way for another: the Lord! Like John, a Christian must know how to discern and must discern the truth from that which seems to be true, but isn’t. Finally, a Christian knows how to diminish so that the Lord increases in the hearts and souls of others.”

Synodal Reflection: Jordan is a symbol of repentance and Jerusalem, of peace and righteousness. In their own way, prophets Baruch and John cry out in the words of Isaiah (40:3-5): “winding ways will be straightened and rough roads made smooth!” This is a call for each of us to give up our crooked ways and walk the straight and narrow path. It is a call to smoothen the rough edges and tune our antennae to God’s Spirit. Repentance is *metanoia* – a ‘turning from’ evil and a ‘turning to’ good. Am I, and are we, ready for this kind of repentance and reparation as a synodal people?
