

## Be a peacemaker, pathmaker, pathbreaker

Second Sunday Of Advent – Cycle A – December 8, 2019

Isa 11:1-10; Rom 15:4-9; Mt 3:1-12

*“Prepare a way for the Lord, make his paths straight”* (Mt 3:3)

### Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. The image of a ‘*path*’ or a ‘*way*’ is a Biblical symbol with multiple meanings—leading up or down; towards progress or regress; physical or psychological; literal or figurative; mental or moral. When Jesus told his disciples, “I am the *way* ... no one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn 14:6), he was drawing maps and providing signposts that his disciples should follow. No wonder, the early Christian community that followed Jesus was simply called ‘The Way’ (Acts 9:2; 19:9; 22:14,22, etc). This imagery could profitably be used today to highlight the ‘paths’ or the ‘ways’ of three prophets: (i) Isaiah; (ii) John the Baptist; (iii) Jesus Christ. In the first reading, Isaiah prophesies about the Messiah in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, after the destruction brought about by the Assyrians (see Isa ch. 10). Assyria is “the rod of God’s anger” (Isa 10:8)—an instrument used by God to destroy the northern Kingdom. Yet, in the midst of the dross and darkness caused by inept and idolatrous leaders, God would show his people a new pathway. The ‘shoot’ spoken of is a reference to the Messiah who would arise as a “shoot” out of the lineage of King David, whose father was Jesse. Davidic descendants would rule Judah for five hundred years. However, the qualities of the much-awaited Messiah would far surpass anything that the people had ever imagined.
2. The Messiah would lead in the power of God’s Spirit and would be blessed with manifold qualities of mind, heart and spirit. These are usually regarded as the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit: (a) wisdom; (b) understanding; (c) counsel; (d) fortitude; (e) knowledge; (f) piety; and (g) fear of the Lord. The figure described here is a quiet, yet powerful and charismatic leader who will judge not on the basis of exterior appearances but on interior attitudes. His reign shall usher in perfect peace. The peacemaking Messiah will bring about harmony not only among human beings but also among all creatures that normally seem antagonistic, one to the other: wolf to the lamb; calf versus lion; cow and bear; children playing with snakes, etc. These are poetic descriptions to depict an era of perfect peace. What is envisaged here is a ‘return’ to a Garden-of-Eden-like state since the harmlessness of the serpent (cobra, viper, adder or asp), is stressed. This ‘return’ or turnaround implies making a pathway back to God, restoring right relationships with God, others, and nature. This ‘root of Jesse’ will stand tall amidst peoples and nations signaling peace for all the earth.
3. “Prepare a way for the Lord, make his paths straight” (Mt 3:3) is the call of John the Baptist to sinners who come to the River Jordon to be baptized by him. To prepare himself for the unique heralding mission entrusted to him, John retreated into the Judean wilderness and lived as hermit, only to appear when the time was ripe for the advent of the promised Messiah. The figures of the Messiah, Jesus, and John, his cousin, seem quite different. While the messianic figure in the first reading seems serene and mild, John appears to be fiery—truly a recluse wearing clothing of camel’s hair and surviving on locusts and honey.

He is particularly harsh in condemning the Pharisees and the Sadducees—you “brood of vipers”—for their righteousness did not go beyond mere observance of dos and don’ts, rules and regulations. He is fully aware that he is only a finger-pointer to Him “who is more powerful than I am,” who “will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (v.11). Like a farmer separating wheat from the chaff, the Messiah will separate good from the bad, righteous from the unrighteous.

**Linking the Second Reading and the Psalm to the Theme:** The opening sentence of the second reading—“Everything that was written long ago in the scriptures was meant to teach us something about *hope*” (Rom 15:4)—moves us to make meaning of our lives by pondering prophetic promises. Today, given the lack of peacemakers and the amount of violence all around, how does one interpret the idealism in the responsorial refrain: “In his days justice shall flourish and peace till the moon fails”? (Ps 72:7). In *our* days, justice and peace do not seem to flourish. Hence, it is up to you and me to “live in harmony with one another” (v.5); i.e., to be peacemakers. Moreover, “Christ became a servant” showing us a new pathway, servanthood, as the essence of being his follower and walking his way.

**Three Classical Ways from Catholic Tradition:** John’s message: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand!” (Mt 3:2) is a ‘*metanoia*-message’ (Greek, meaning ‘change of mind’) – an Adventic invitation to clean-up, rise-up, tie-up. *Metanoia* implies nothing less than a U-turn, a total turnaround tested only by the fruit one bears (vv.8,10). Christian mystics have spoken about:

1. *The Purgative Way:* this is the ‘clean up’ one requires. It begins with a desire to want to enter the Jordan, so to say, to be purged of sin, to be washed by Christ. It entails being, first, at peace with oneself and then seeking to be a peacemaker with others.
2. *The Illuminative Way:* this is the ‘rise up’ that one must seek to do—to rise up from being purged of sin and cleansed by Christ so as to find pathways by insight and discernment to reach out to others. We seek how we can make inroads and out-roads towards others and towards the care of our common home, the earth. This Tuesday, we’ll be celebrating ‘World Human Rights’ Day’ (December 10), which ought to make us thirst for justice, like the Messiah.
3. *The Unitive Way:* this is the ‘link up’ or the ‘tie up’ that one ought to strive for in order to attain Christian perfection. It is the uniting of one’s truest self to God, the Absolute Being. In being totally united to God, one grows in becoming ‘another Christ’. The solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of our Blessed Mother Mary being shifted to Monday, Dec. 9, we could seek to emulate her in her state of total union with God. Let’s pray with her: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word, O God!” (Lk 1:38)

**Reflection:** As we go higher or deeper into the spiritual life, let’s shed more and more of our unhelpful baggage which weighs heavily on our shoulders. Advent invites us to be peace-makers, seeking harmony; to be path-makers going out to encounter others, seeking to serve with love; and, finally, to be path-breakers creatively using the gifts of the Spirit, given above, to shed old, redundant ways of living and to live life anew—capitalising on the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit.

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