

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT – YEAR A

(Isaiah 35:1–6, 10; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11)

Excerpts of Pope Francis – Angelus 11 Dec 2022

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Brothers and sisters, just like last Sunday, the Gospel speaks to us about John the Baptist. This time, he is in prison, and sends his disciples to ask Jesus: “Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?” (*Mt* 11:4). Indeed, John, hearing of Jesus’ works, is seized with doubt as to whether He is really the Messiah or not. In fact, he imagined a stern Messiah who would come and do justice with power by chastising sinners. Now, on the contrary, Jesus has words and gestures of compassion towards all; at the centre of His action is the mercy that forgives, whereby “the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them” (v. 6).

So, what does this crisis of John the Baptist, tell us. First, we know that John is in prison. As well as being a physical place, it could also be the inner situation he is experiencing. In prison there is darkness, there is no possibility of seeing clearly and seeing beyond it. In fact, the Baptist is no longer able to recognize Jesus as the awaited Messiah. He is overcome by doubt. So to rise above it, he sends the disciples to check: “Go and see if he is the Messiah or not”. This might surprise us that this should happen to John, the one who had baptized Jesus in the Jordan and had indicated him to be the Lamb of God (cf. *Jn* 1:29). It is consoling to us to know that even the greatest believer does go through the tunnel of doubt.

This is not a bad thing; on the contrary, sometimes it is essential for spiritual growth: it helps us understand that God is always greater than we imagine Him to be. His works are surprising compared to our calculations; His actions are always different, they exceed our needs and expectations; and therefore, we **must** never stop seeking Him and converting to His true face.

A great theologian used to say that God “needs to be rediscovered in stages... sometimes believing that we are losing Him” (H. DE LUBAC). This is what the Baptist does: in doubt, he still seeks Him, questions Him, “argues” with Him and finally rediscovers Him. John, defined by Jesus as the greatest among those born of women (cf. *Mt* 11:11), teaches us, in short, not to close God within our own mindsets. This is always the danger, the temptation: to make ourselves a God to our measure, a God to use. **God** is something else.

Brothers and sisters, we too at times find ourselves in this situation, in an inner jail, unable to recognize the Lord, whom we perhaps hold captive in the opinion that we already know everything about Him. One never knows everything about God, never! Perhaps we have in mind a powerful God who does what He wants, instead of the God of humility, the God of mercy and love, who always intervenes respecting our freedom and our choices.

Perhaps we even find ourselves saying to Him: “Are you really, so humble, the God who is coming to save us?”. Something similar can happen to us: we have our ideas, our biases and we attach rigid labels to others, especially those we feel are different to us. Advent is a *time for overturning our perspectives*, for letting ourselves be surprised by God’s mercy. God always astonishes us. Some of us know the song and movie “*I can only imagine*”, talking about wonder. God is always the One who stirs wonder in us.

In the time of Advent, as we prepare the Nativity display for the Infant Jesus, we learn again who our Lord is; a time to leave behind certain **preconceptions** about God and our brothers and sisters. Advent is a time in which, instead of thinking about gifts for ourselves, we can give words and gestures of consolation to those who are wounded, as Jesus did with the blind, the deaf and the lame.

We celebrated recently the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary on December 8th. We also celebrated Our Lady of Guadalupe on December 12th. A little bit like John the Baptist, she is part of the story, even so on Christmas day.

May Our Lady take us by the hand, like a mother, may she take us by the hand in these days of preparation for Christmas, and help us recognize in the **smallness** of the Infant the **greatness** of God who is coming.