

Second Sunday of Advent C - Mountains and Valleys

December 8, 2024

This Sunday's first reading is from the Book of Baruch. Baruch had been a disciple of the prophet Jeremiah. This was at the time of the Babylonian conquest and the exile of the people of Judah, about 588 BC. Most of the people were led in chains to Babylon. Baruch's prophecy is that the time is coming when the hand of God would prevail over the captors and the people would return from their exile. And that time did come when Cyrus of Persia conquered the Babylonians and sent all the captives back to their homelands. "For God has commanded that every lofty mountain be made low, and that the age-old depths and gorges be filled to level ground, that Israel may advance secure in the glory of God. The forests and every fragrant kind of tree have overshadowed Israel at God's command; for God is leading Israel in joy by the light of his glory, with his mercy and justice for company." (Baruch 5:1-9) The Hebrews were brought into exile not just because they were weaker than their neighbours, but because they deserted the God who had formed them into His people. No, they had not stopped worshiping in the Temple, but their faith in God was very much just lip service. They joined in with the pagan customs of those around them. They practiced pagan immorality. They even offered their children as child sacrifice to the pagan gods. They adopted pagan glorification of the material over the spiritual. For all these sins, God let them be in exile. Once in exile, the people realized they were captives of a powerful kingdom and that they were completely dependent on God to free them. They needed Him to work his Power and Might for them. Baruch prophesied that God would deliver them. And he did. So what does this have to do with us, living thousands of years later? Why should we be concerned with the historical events 25 centuries ago? Well, historically, these events may not have anything to do with us. But, if we go beyond history and consider the human condition, then the readings are all about us. The condition of the Hebrews is not all that different from our human condition now. So many people give lip service to religion, and live as pagans. So many people join in with the glorification of the material over the spiritual. Immorality attacks us every day. Sometimes it is out in the world. Sometimes it is within our families. Often it is within each of us. We have to fight evil, but it is stronger than we are. So we call upon God to deliver us from evil. He is more powerful than anything that is attacking us. He frees us from all that holds us captive.

In the Gospel reading (3:1-6), John the Baptist also cries out that God is coming among us. "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths. Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low. The winding roads shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." John's words are a bitter pill to swallow. They hurt because there is so much in our lives to be set right. He is speaking the uncomfortable truth, challenging us about our sinful behaviour. He is telling us there is a wrong way and a right way to live and if we want God to come into our hearts, we have to turn away from sin through prayer and repentance. Time spent in prayer helps us to acknowledge our failings, sharpen our ability to hear God's word and helps us come to terms with our inner emptiness which cries out for consolation. Repentance will open up the door way to allow the Spirit of God to come into the silence of our hearts so we can humbly beg for his forgiveness and grant us peace.

Both Baruch and John proclaim the Lord is coming, anticipating the birth of the Messiah, the promised Jesus. They proclaim that God will flatten the mountains and fill the valleys. These powerful images speak of more than the landscape; they announce the straightening of the human spirit, the filling of empty hearts, the smoothing of the way that leads to healing and reconciliation. When we see brokenness in the world, violence and discord and hatred, we are called to mend the broken world, and to trust that God is bringing about His Kingdom in our midst. There is nothing that will stop God's plan of bringing salvation to all. In the Gospel, John the Baptist prepares himself, and he invites others to join in. God is coming among us, attention and correction to the roughest places of our lives will smooth a path to the glory of God for us and for the world. The "Peace on earth" we sing at Christmas is both a gift from God and a commitment we make by the way we live. We must humble ourselves and ask Jesus to give us his light to

lead the way. Let us give some attention to the mountains and valleys of our life and our world. How will God bring more life and peace to the world through these unlikely and challenging places? How can we help to make the promise alive?