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Experiencing Forgiveness and Salvation

Biblical Reflection for 2nd Sunday of Advent, Year A

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TORONTO, NOV. 30, 2010 (Zenit.org).- In today's Scripture readings, two of the three outstanding Advent guides (Isaiah, John the Baptist and Mary) show us the proper attitude to assume as we prepare to welcome the Savior of the world.

First there is Isaiah, the prophet of consolation and singer of hope. The idyllic reading from the prophet Isaiah (11:1-10) speaks of a shoot that will sprout from the stump of Jesse, and from his roots a bud shall blossom (v 1). This is a reference to the fact that after the Babylonian Exile only a stump of the Davidic dynasty would remain; from it would arise the new shoot, the messianic King. In verses 2-3 we have the source of the traditional names of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

An image of the idyllic harmony of paradise (vv 6-9) is a dramatic symbol of the universal peace and justice of messianic times. Throughout this season of Advent, Isaiah proclaims a true and proper Gospel for the people of Israel, enslaved in Babylon, and urges them to remain vigilant in prayer, to recognize "the signs" of the coming of the Messiah.

Kingdom at hand

Then there is John the Baptist (Matthew 3:1-12), the precursor of the Messiah, who is presented as a "voice crying in the wilderness," preaching "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Unlike Luke, Matthew says nothing of the baptist's origins and does not make him a relative of Jesus.

Matthew takes up the order of Jesus' ministry found in the Gospel of Mark, beginning with the preparatory preaching of John the Baptist. The baptist calls for a change of heart and conduct, a turning of one's life from rebellion to obedience toward God. It is the only condition for recognizing the Messiah already present in the world. The kingdom of heaven is at hand: "heaven" (literally, "the heavens") is a substitute for the name "God" that was avoided by devout Jews of the time out of reverence. The expression "the kingdom of heaven" occurs only in the Gospel of Matthew. It means the effective rule of God over his people. In its fullness it includes not only human obedience to God's word, but the triumph of God over physical evils, ultimately over death. In the expectation found in Jewish apocalyptic, the kingdom was to be ushered in by a judgment in which sinners would be condemned and perish, an expectation shared by the Baptist. This was later modified in Christian understanding where the kingdom was seen as being established in stages, culminating with the parousia (second coming) of Jesus.

John's wardrobe

Matthew presents John the Baptist as the first Christian preacher. Wearing the clothes of a latter-day Elijah (2 Kings 1:8), John solemnly proclaims that God is undertaking a new involvement with humankind. The

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expectation of the return of Elijah from heaven to prepare Israel for the final manifestation of God's kingdom was widespread, and according to Matthew this expectation was fulfilled in the Baptist's ministry (Matthew 11:14; 17:11-13).

Ritual washing was practiced by various groups in Palestine between 150 B.C. and A.D. 250. John's baptism may have been related to the purificatory washings of the Essenes at Qumran along the shores of the Dead Sea. John's is a baptism of repentance requiring the convert to adopt a new way of thinking and acting.

Pharisees, Sadducees and us

The unlikely combination of Pharisees and Sadducees in today's Gospel passage is evidence of this desire to reform (Matthew 3:7). The Pharisees were marked by devotion to the law, written and oral, and the scribes, experts in the law, belonged predominantly to this group. The Sadducees were the priestly aristocratic party, centered in Jerusalem. They accepted as scripture only the first five books of the Old Testament, followed only the letter of the law, rejected the oral legal traditions, and were opposed to teachings not found in the Pentateuch, such as the resurrection of the dead. Matthew links both of these groups together as enemies of Jesus. The threatening words that follow are addressed to them rather than to "the crowds" as in Luke 3:7. The "coming wrath" is the judgment that will bring about the destruction of unrepentant sinners.

At the end of our days on earth, at the moment of death, we will be evaluated on our acceptance of Jesus' words and imitation of his life. God calls each of us to follow in Jesus' footsteps, making our existence, as he did, a gift of love. And the fruit of love is that fruit which "befits repentance," to which John the Baptist refers while he addresses cutting words to the Pharisees and Sadducees among the crowds who had come for baptism.

In Matthew 3:11 we hear of the baptism with the Holy Spirit. The water baptism of John will be followed by an "immersion" of the repentant in the cleansing power of the Spirit of God, and of the unrepentant in the destroying power of God's judgment. However, some see the Holy Spirit and fire as synonymous, and the effect of this "baptism" as either purification or destruction. The discrimination between the good and the bad (Matthew 3:12) is compared to the procedure by which a farmer separates wheat and chaff. The winnowing fan was a forklike shovel with which the threshed wheat was thrown into the air. The kernels fell to the ground; the light chaff, blown off by the wind, was gathered and burned up.

The mission

John's whole mission was a preparation for the Messiah's coming. When his own disciples came to him and were troubled about the meaning of Jesus' baptizing in the Jordan, he answered them confidently: "No one can receive anything except what is given them from heaven." John says that he is only the friend of the bridegroom, the one who must decrease while his master increases (John 3:25-30). The baptizer defined his humanity in terms of its limitations. When the time had come, John led his own disciples to Jesus and indicated to them the Messiah, the True Light, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Jesus' own testimony to John makes the Baptizer the greatest of all Israelite heroes (Matthew 11:7-19; Luke 7:24-35).

John considered himself to be less than a slave to Jesus: "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Matthew 3:11). John gave the people of his time an experience of forgiveness and salvation, knowing full well that he himself was not the Messiah, the one who could save. Do we allow others to have experiences of God, of forgiveness and of salvation?

The crowds came to John and asked him, "What then shall we do?" The baptist didn't mince words. He got

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right to the point and said what needed to be said. He advised no one to leave the world they are in, however ambiguous it may be. Rather he told those with two coats to share one with those who had none. Likewise those with an abundance of food were to share with the hungry. Tax collectors were told to collect no more than was appointed to them. Soldiers were to rob no one by violence or by false accusation. They were to be content with their wages. What were people to do to prepare for the imminent coming of the Messiah? To be generous, just, honest, grateful and compassionate (Luke 3:10-14).

A perennial message

The Israelite prophet is one who has received a divine call to be a messenger and interpreter of the Word of God. The word that came to the prophet compelled him to speak. The prophet is also the conscience of a community and the conscience of a nation. Ezekiel tells us a prophet is like the watchman, the person who is out there watching for what might happen to the community, issuing a warning, trying to alert everyone: "Things are going the wrong way" or "We're in danger. We have to change. We have to be ready to protect ourselves." The prophet is the one who sees farther, perhaps, than others, and the one who sees implications in what is going on.

At times prophets shared God's anger, God's compassion, God's sorrow, God's disappointment, God's revulsion, God's sensitivity for people, and God's seriousness. They did not share these things in the abstract; rather, they shared God's feelings about the concrete events of their time. This is the type of prophet that John the Baptist was. He didn't mince words. He got right to the point and said what needed to be said. How often our words, thoughts and actions are incoherent and ambiguous! How often do we skirt the issues and great questions of our time and of our Church! The true prophets of Israel model for how to counter all forms of duplicity in our own lives.

John the Baptist continues to speak down the centuries to every generation. The "voice" of the great prophet asks us to prepare the way of the Lord, who comes in the external and internal wildernesses of today, thirsting for the living water that is Christ. May the memory of John guide us to true conversion of heart, so that we may make the necessary choices to harmonize our mentalities and lives with the Gospel.

"Verbum Domini"

May I suggest to you a wonderful way to prepare a way for the Lord in your own lives this Advent? Read Benedict XVI's apostolic exhortation "Verbum Domini" (The Word of the Lord Abides Forever) that was recently published by the Vatican. This important document is the culmination of the very important Synod of Bishops on the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church that took place in October 2008. For the next months, I will be suggesting particular sections of the apostolic exhortation to read during the week.

This week, I suggest section #11 on the "Christology of the word": "From this glimpse at all reality as the handiwork of the Blessed Trinity through the divine Word, we can understand the statement made by the author of the Letter to the Hebrews: 'in many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world' (1:1-2).

"It is very beautiful to see how the entire Old Testament already appears to us as a history in which God communicates his word: indeed, "by his covenant with Abraham (cf. Genesis 15:18) and, through Moses, with the race of Israel (cf. Exodus 24:8), he gained a people for himself, and to them he revealed himself in words and deeds as the one, living and true God.

"It was his plan that Israel might learn by experience God's ways with humanity and, by listening to the voice of God speaking to them through the prophets, might gradually understand his ways more fully and more

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clearly, and make them more widely known among the nations (cf. Psalm 21:28-29; 95:1-3; Isaiah 2:1-4; Jeremiah 3:17)."

[The readings for the Second Sunday of Advent are Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-9; Matthew 3:1-12]

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