

A man who thought he was John the Baptist was arrested for disturbing the peace and put in a cell. There was another disturbed individual in the next cell and our friend tried to comfort him with his routine "I am John the Baptist," he cried, "Jesus has sent me!" The reply came back immediately, "I did not!"

Today we hear from 2 people 600 years apart: Isaiah comforting his people in exile and John the Baptist effectively calling people to open their hearts to God's Comfort.

In 587 B.C., the Babylonian army defeated Israel and took the bulk of the populace, including all of the leadership, into captivity in Babylon. The Jewish people remained in this Babylonian captivity for 48 years. Isaiah chapter 39 was written about Israel's impending doom. For example, in chapter 39, verse 6, the prophet wrote, "Days are coming when all that is in your house, and that which your ancestors have stored up until this day, shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left says the Lord."

This prophecy did nothing to make Isaiah popular. The people of Israel had assumed that as God's people, he would protect them from any real harm. Surely God would not let Jerusalem and its Temple fall into the hands of the enemy. Yet the prophets warned that the people were to repent – to turn away from sin, to turn back to God. The prophets warned that unless Israel acted like the People of God they were created to be, God's protection would not hold.

Jerusalem did fall to the Babylonians, bringing a great social, political, and theological tragedy. After all, how do we know if God loves and cares for us when we see all we care about crumbling around us? Where is God when your dreams lie smashed at your feet?

The prophet then describes the comfort God gives with a reassuring image, "*He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.*" These were written as words of comfort to a people who had come to wonder if God cared for them at all.

There is a sense in which we experience exile today, and there is so much need for comfort in this world of heartbreak where we find ourselves. Every day, we hear new stories of how we have failed each other, how we have used our talents, gifts, power, and position to manoeuvre our way to “success” at the expense of so many others. We have so completely fallen for this version of the world that we expect losers and winners at every turn. If you are not a winner, you are a loser. If not a loser, a winner, and the winners get to be in charge. They get to use their power to remind everyone else who is on top. In this way, living in this kind of world, we can relate to the exiled community of Israelites. The Babylonians were clearly the winners of this power struggle; they used their power to take over and kick out the losers, enacting laws to undermine the foundations of the Jewish people, their culture, and their faith. Despite all of this, feeling forgotten and alone, strangers in a strange land, God was with God’s people. God did not abandon them. And he does not abandon us either.

John the Baptist calls us to transform our lives and open our hearts to the heart of God. That is challenging but, ultimately, it is an offer of comfort, because the Lord to whom John calls on us to turn our hearts is not one who is here to judge us. Rather, he is one who has come to heal and renew us.

As human beings, our vulnerability leaves us with many reasons to need comfort. We are hurt – physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. The community to which Isaiah was called was an especially vulnerable community, suffering the effects of years in exile. Though most of us may never understand that form of vulnerability, we can all acknowledge our own need for comfort. What is especially interesting to notice is that the call is not for comfort alone. Specifically, we are not meant to get *comfortable*, but to be *comforted* so we can then be moved into action. The way of the Lord is prepared through our mutual suffering in which our compassion for one another prepares the way of the Lord. We are called to action as a community to proclaim the Good News by what we say and do, backed up by the way we are with each other. St Paul once asked two vital questions, “*How can people know about God if they have never heard? and how can they hear if nobody is sent to them?*”

The vocation to proclaim or preach religious truth is vital, if God is to be known and loved. Jesus found his first disciples among the circle of the Baptist's followers. It was John who showed them the value of self-control and of prayer, who urged them to listen to the inner voice of God, with a contrite and faithful heart. He prepared the minds of people in his circle to welcome the bringer of salvation. That is how God seems to work: sending the message of salvation and meaningful living to us through each other. If we were more committed as Christians, maybe we could do more to influence others towards faith in God.

In all sorts of ways, people are in position to influence others, for good or ill. This is clearly so for those who work in the communications media, press, radio and T.V. But ordinary people doing ordinary jobs can also influence the views and values of those they interact with. In light of today's portrayal of John the Baptist, we can ask if our way of speaking and behaving helps others to share our values, or do we confirm their suspicion that this world is a selfish and cynical place?

The God John the Baptist invites us to rediscover this Advent, is like a shepherd feeding his flock, gathering lambs in his arms, holding them against his breast, and leading to their rest the mother-ewes who are soon to give birth. This is a very tender power, the life-force of a faithful and enduring love, a love that gathers and nurtures and reassures.

It is this God who comes to us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. In the gospel, the Baptist refers to Jesus as *'more powerful than I am.'* He is the more powerful one, in the sense that the first reading defines power. It is Jesus who gives full expression to God's tender love that brings healing to the broken, strength to the weak and rest to the weary. It is this adult Jesus, now risen Lord, coming to us and present with us, who we celebrate at Christmas. The Baptist calls us this Advent to prepare a way in our lives for the coming of this Lord, this Shepherd, in whom mercy and faithfulness have met, justice and peace have embraced. This is the one we are called to meet this Advent, who can give meaning and depth to all our other encounters.

John was clearly a man prepared to stand aside, surrender his ego for the glory of God. People admired and trusted him as a person of holiness and integrity. He taught them, bluntly making them aware of their sinfulness and calling on them to “*Repent*”. To “repent” in the Gospel involves a radical transformation in our way of living. It means a conversion, a real turning around, a re-directing of one’s whole life. Less suspicious less cynical and more respectful. And so we prepare for the coming of Jesus, but not just by a pre-Christmas confession to tidy ourselves up and get rid of some of the things we regret having done in recent months.

Peter, in today’s 2nd Reading, tells us that a “day” with the Lord can be a 1,000 years. This is probably directed at those who thought (and perhaps feared) that the Lord was coming soon. “*The Lord is not being slow in carrying out his promises [to come again], as anybody else might be called slow; but he is being patient with you all, wanting nobody to be lost and everybody be brought to change their ways.*” In other words, if the end of the world seems so slow in coming, it is to give people time to mend their ways, to redirect their lives. At the same time, he also warns that the coming can be very sudden, as we all know is very true.

“Since everything is coming to an end like this, you should be living holy and saintly lives while you wait and long for the Day of God to come... So then, my friends, while you are waiting, do your best to live lives without spot or stain so that he will find you at peace.”

Notice he prays “*that he will find you at peace*”. The coming of the Lord does not fill his friends with fear and anxiety but rather with a kind of joyful anticipation of one friend to another. The fruit of every day living the Way of Jesus is a real interior peace that makes us ready to meet him at any time. We are to transform our lives by removing all the obstacles that get in the way of our meeting with Jesus. Then “the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all mankind shall see it”, and we will be ‘at peace’.

It is only through what we say and do that others can come to know Jesus. So many people we know face many obstacles in getting to know the real Jesus (and, to be honest, sometimes we ourselves are those obstacles).

*“Go up on a high mountain, joyful messenger to Zion.
Shout with a loud voice, joyful messenger to Jerusalem,”*
says Isaiah in the First Reading today.

*“Shout without fear,
say to the towns of Judah, ‘Here is your God’.”*

Yes, that is what each of us should be doing – perhaps beginning with members of our own families! Tell people about Him who *“is like a shepherd feeding his flock, gathering lambs in his arms”*. Each of us can reach people that no one else can reach – our family members, relatives, work colleagues and other people who may come into our life.