

Advent 2 – 2019

(Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-9; Matthew 3:1-12)

Christmas advertising. The so-called “spirit of Christmas.” What a travesty - it’s all about commercial profit on the back of people having a good time and using the consumption of food and drink and the giving of gifts to make a profit. I wonder how many people, apart from you, of course, actually know *why* we give presents at Christmas.

Is this a substitute for the true, life-changing Love that God shows us in the gift of His Son?

What is the forgiveness that John the Baptist promises; indeed does he promise anything? His is not an easy message. His call to repentance - what does this achieve, what do his penitents expect?

John is anticipating a change in individuals’ ways of life not for them, but for the nation, which has gone astray. The same call as the OT prophets - a call to all Israel. Individuals change and that changes those in community with them and that changes the whole community, society and ultimately the nation (-humanity?) A change that prepares them for the coming of the Messiah.

Are we ready for the refreshment of our faith and Christian way of life that Christmas inspires?

Let us think about forgiveness for a minute. It is at the heart of our relationship with God and with each other - a demonstration of love. Christ’s forgiveness - what does this achieve; what do we expect to receive; what change is required and expected?

Called to be Christ we must learn to forgive as fully as He did. It is a radical change in attitude affecting our whole lives. And it is the heart of the reason the Christian faith spread so rapidly and fully throughout the world. The decline of faith has many causes, but perhaps one of them may be that the way we behave as Christians does not commend itself to the world like it one did - a radical and loving alternative way of life.

He never gives up on His disciples, despite their inability to understand and to get His message wrong. On the cross He forgives - the unrepentant and the repentant. On the road to Emmaus He seeks out those who are running away and He goes along with them. He doesn’t stop them to turn them around; He walks with them until they see and understand and believe. He forgives Peter, because as St. Peter knows he *does* love Jesus, despite everything appearing to be otherwise.

That we are loved is at the heart of our relationship with God - loved unconditionally and without reservation. That our sins break the bond of love on our side does not mean that they change God’s love for us. To Him we are always loveable. But the rupture in our relationship needs healing - for us, we need the healing, we need to know that all is well again. Like making up after a quarrel. We all know how that feels.

Of course the change that John is working for has a specific purpose - to prepare people's hearts to be receptive for the coming of Jesus and His life-changing gift of grace. The change that Christ is bringing is even more radical than that brought about by the change of hearts John is calling for.

Isaiah envisages so fundamental a change in creation with the coming of the Messiah's Kingdom that the normal natural laws are turned around.

So, Jesus, in calling us to repent is expecting a change in our lives - to behave in harmony with His teaching is to do things sometimes quite contrary to the way we have become accustomed. Think about how we behave - how much of this is according to how Jesus expects? And do you still think that you have no need to go to confession?

Now, if you have stopped going to confession, why is that? Has it become meaningless for you? Has it become a mechanical recitation of the same old sins? Or are you really seeking reconciliation, healing, change? Perhaps you think that you haven't really any sins to confess. Really? Are you thinking that your sins are only things you have done or thought wrongly, or do you also think about missed opportunities for good? It isn't meant to be a guilt "trip." For example: Where is your focus, your heart, when you come to Mass, when you come to Jesus at the altar; He who loves you so much?

Perhaps we need a better, a more positive understanding of what it is about. If you haven't been to confession for ages, ask for guidance, don't be embarrassed. The way you were taught when you were seven years old may not be the best way of understanding it today. If the sacrament of reconciliation isn't working for you, then something is wrong and needs to be put right. Your priest can help you.

Perhaps you confessed that you had been angry with a loved one; confessing this means that you are sorry for it, that you don't want to do it again, and God who loves you beyond measure rejoices that here is the potential for the healing of a relationship between two of His beloved children. And that is going to affect other people around you, too.

So this reconciliation is part of the life of the community, part of the life of the church. We are ambassadors for Christ, says St. Paul. As we are healed, our refreshed hearts become beacons of light for the community. Andrew ran to his brother Simon and said, "We have found the Messiah! And he brought him to Jesus." Philip said to Nathaniel: "Come and see." If we are to heal our broken world, first we must let the love of God heal our own souls and what better way is there to prepare for Christmas. Here is the real spirit of Christmas.

Fr Tim