

Homily – December 8th, 2024 – Second Sunday of Advent



Between 1962 and 1965, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and Pope John XXIII, the Church underwent its greatest reform. We call it the Second Vatican Council. Even though it was the

Roman Catholic bishops of the world who voted on final outcomes, it nonetheless sought out the opinion of other scholars and various experts, thereby making it an “ecumenical” council. Because it is 60 years in the rearview mirror, we tend to forget what a big deal Vatican II really was. Personally, I think we have only scratched the surface of what those reforms were hoping to bring about.

One of the many shifts in mentality brought about by the Council was a shift from seeing ourselves as a “triumphant Church” to a “pilgrim Church.” Until then, there was a tendency to equate the Church with salvation itself. If you weren’t a baptized member of the Roman Catholic Church, you were putting your own salvation at risk! So, we went from “no salvation outside the Church” to “we are a pilgrim people.” We went from “having all the answers” to “being seekers on the way.” Vatican II said that we are more than a Church of pilgrims; we are a pilgrim people. We are not just individuals on individual journeys trying to get our individual souls to heaven. Rather, the entire Church, from the pope down to you and me, is on a journey to building God’s Kingdom

in this time and in this place. That project, of building God's kingdom, is to continue until the Second coming of Christ. So, we have not arrived; we have work to do. The Church is not perfect and will always be in need of reform.

Advent reminds us that we are on a journey toward Christmas. The three readings we heard proclaimed today speak about journeys. Some people hear the call to adventure and embrace the journey; others stay put in their own self-righteousness, feeling they have all the answers. No need to grow, improve, or move from where I am, thank you very much.

The prophet Baruch, in that first reading, speaks about how his Jewish people were led away, in 586 B.C., to Babylon. They were a defeated people expelled from their own country. Today's refugees would be able to relate very well to what Baruch was speaking about. Baruch tried to reassure family and friends who were being led away that God had not forgotten them. Baruch tries to reassure these sad people that this journey, which they make with only a few personal belongings, is not the only journey they will experience. Baruch writes, ***“For they went out on foot*** (that's how little a refugee has, not even shoes for their feet!) ***led away by their enemies, but God will bring them back carried in glory, as on a royal throne”*** (Baruch 5:6). Your first journey was a journey of a slave, full of humility, shame and degradation. But, that's not God's plan for you. You will make another journey, a journey back home where you won't walk with dirty, aching, bare feet, but you will be carried on a throne.

In imitation of Jesus, we are not supposed to have favorites, but we all do. Of all the communities of faith that Paul started, the community of Philippi was his favorite. Philippi is part of Greece, and it was the first place in all of Europe where the gospel was proclaimed. Paul, the great missionary, always started by visiting synagogues and telling his fellow Jews about this Jesus. Philippi was so small, they did have a quorum—that is, 10 Jewish men—to qualify for a synagogue. So, he started with what he had. He started with a woman named Lydia, a merchant, and a handful of others who met down by the river. That's how the Church started in Europe with a few open-minded people. From prison, Paul writes the Letter to the Philippians. He says in that second reading, "Every time I think of you, my little group of faithful people who gather by the river, my heart fills with joy and I have to thank God for you. And what gives me joy is because of your sharing in the Gospel from the first day I met you until now. You've stayed on the journey even though you were such a small group. You remained humble and never felt you had all the answers. Remain on the journey you are on, and God will bring this good work to completion."

In the gospel reading, John the Baptist speaks about persevering in the journey, the pilgrimage you might say, that Jesus is inviting us onto. John the Baptist doesn't quote Baruch. He quotes the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah is speaking about the same reality that Baruch was speaking about, the reality of the Jews coming home from 50 years of exile in Babylon; their slavery is over. God has rescued them. God made a way for them to make their way home, "Now" says John the Baptist, "you must make a way for God. Level the

mountain and raise the valleys so that all the world, all flesh, may see the salvation of God.”

I had a man in my office this week who is making a powerful and honest journey of his own. He came to do the 5th step in the Alcoholics Anonymous process. All 12-step programs have a 5th step where the person has to make a kind of “confession,” a reckoning with how they hurt people because of their addiction and a promise to make amends. It’s a pilgrimage that moves him from the bottle to serenity. Mountains are being lowered and valleys are being filled in with this man. I have no doubt he will see the salvation of God in his life.

Anyone who has dealt with a chronic disease, one for which there is no cure, has endured a similar movement. There are days when they must feel they are so low in the valley that it just can’t get any worse. Or, to spin the metaphor the other way, they feel there is a mountain before them that is insurmountable. I think also of a person who has lost their husband or wife or the parents of a child who dies suddenly or who takes their own life. Imagine the obstacles, the mountains, the valleys they face as they try to find some serenity, some meaning, some potential for newness and peace.

John the Baptist invites all of us to the river, the Jordan River of our minds. Rivers always held an important place for the Jews in their journeys. Moses led our ancestors in faith, the Israelites, through the desert to the Red Sea. They crossed the waters of the Red Sea to freedom. They now saw themselves as

free people. Later during that same journey, Moses died but his successor, Joshua, led the Israelites across the Jordan River to the Promised Land. They now saw themselves as not only free people but “God’s people” with their own land.

1300 years later, John the Baptist beckons people to that very same water, the Jordan River. It’s no coincidence. He invites people to enter the water, to leave their old selves behind, and to rise to a new identity. Every time a person crossed water, they were made anew. That’s what was supposed to happen to us in the waters of baptism.

You may have noticed in the gospel how God bypassed all the power brokers of the world—Emperor Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, governors, rulers, high priests and, instead, came to a simple, unassuming, powerless guy named John, in the desert of all places. John was chosen and so are you. Your journey, your pilgrimage is not done until you enter the waters that Jesus himself felt the need to enter. In there you will meet the God who came down from the glory of heaven and dared to enter into the struggles of this world. It is this Jesus who brought our ancestors out of bondage so that all flesh, including your flesh, will see the salvation of God.

~Fr. Phil