

Friday (A Carthusian.)

Never forget that God's power is his love, and that our misery is no obstacle to that love. It is not a question, as you may well imagine, of getting rid of all our faults and failings, but of turning to God with these very faults and failings, and of giving ourselves to him just as we are. (We spend our time bemoaning our faults and looking at ourselves, instead of looking at him and growing greater.) He awaits but one word from us, and it is this: *we have believed in his love.* This means that we trust him, that we surrender ourselves, give ourselves to him. We must not be afraid to look at things in this light and to direct our lives accordingly.

Scripture (Isaiah 11:1-4)

A shoot will spring from the stock of Jesse, a new shoot will grow from his roots. On him will rest the spirit of Yahweh, the spirit of wisdom and insight, the spirit of counsel and power, the spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord. His judgement will not be by appearances, his verdict not given on hearsay. He will judge the weak with integrity and give fair sentence for the humblest in the land. His word is a rod that strikes the ruthless, his sentences bring death to the wicked.

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2nd Week of Advent

Repent (enthusiastically) and live the Good News

I'm wonder how many people take seriously Isaiah's prophecy of wolves and lambs, calves and lions all playing nicely together, (Is.11:1-10)? Non- religious people would possibly point to this as an example of 'religion' being completely unrealistic and having no place in a thinking, realistic person's way of seeing the world whilst many religious people (like me, for many years) look at the world now and see it as an ideal world, (possibly in heaven?), but clearly not likely to be realised any time soon.

If we believe that prophets speak the word of God, we can't accept either of these: God is an idealist, but also a realist. The poetic imagery used by Isaiah conveys a truth of how harmony will reign when people 'know' God, i.e. are fully aware of his living presence, (experience God, as opposed to know about him intellectually.) The chapter begins with an explanation of how this will come about – through a Messiah figure, who will be born into the House of David (the stock of Jesse). The word 'scion' is both a gardening term (to do with propagating new plants) and one used in family trees. It has a more powerful meaning when you read the end of the previous chapter, where there is a decisive and comprehensive pruning session clearing out the now useless leaders who have turned from God's ways to make way for fresh growth.

This 'scion' – the Messiah – won't be just another leader: 'on him, the spirit of the Lord rests.' This is the same powerful, infinite spirit present at creation. In other words, the infinite God becomes human – undiminished and undiluted in power or love: the Word becomes flesh. He will rule with God's wisdom, counsel, power and intimate knowledge of God – because of his complete communion with him.

No wonder, then, that John's promise that the Messiah is imminent creates such a stir, (Mt.3:1-12), with people from far and wide coming to be baptised by him. Unlike the ritual baptisms people would have been familiar with, John's was a one-off Baptism of Repentance. To 'repent', (literally to have a change of heart, which is where the intellect and the will meet), involves a turning away from the past and towards God. The total immersion in the water showed they were fully immersing themselves into the new way of living as they waited for the Messiah. They were committing to living a new life, preparing them to be open to - to be able to respond to - the Messiah, who would baptise them in the Spirit - the same Spirit he was filled with, the same spirit Isaiah talked of.

The reason why the Pharisees and Sadducees are treated so harshly by John is not because they are 'bad' people, (they are very religious and upstanding people), but because John knows that the way they use the Law (Pharisees) and the Temple (Sadducees) is rigid human understanding which has effectively kept God out, and means they will not be open to the new teachings and different perspective which Jesus will bring. Repentance requires a letting go of ways that are not God's.

The Christians in Rome were in danger of going down the same road, which is why Paul urges more tolerance, (Rm. 15:4-9). Chapter 14 makes clear how rigid they were with the effect that they were excluding pagan converts, who were always part of God's plans.

The call to repent is not simply to examine what I do wrong; it is to see all aspects of my life in the light of Jesus' presence. The extent to which I don't 'know' him is a measure of how incomplete is my letting go to be filled with this same spirit. Advent is a time to recognise which areas of my life I won't allow to be baptised . Martin Bennett.

Monday (Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh)

Repentance must not be mistaken for remorse, it does not consist in feeling terribly sorry that things went wrong in the past; it is an active, positive attitude which consists in moving in the right direction. To lament one's past is a part of repentance, of course, but an act of repentance remains unreal and barren as long as it has not led us to doing the will of the Father. We have a tendency to think it should result in fine emotions and we are quite often satisfied with emotions instead of real, deep changes.

Scripture (Romans 12:1-2)

I urge you, then, brothers and sisters, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, dedicated and acceptable to God. Do not model your behaviour on the contemporary world, but let the renewing of your minds transform you, so that you may discern for yourselves what is the will of God.

Tuesday (John Main, OSB)

For St. Benedict, the ground on which conversion is made is the heart, the most simple and most absolute level of being. More and more we should not merely believe what we say, but be what we believe. The essential conversion is not concerned with externals because it is not a change from one form to another: conversion of heart is from idea to reality. When we encounter the vision of St. John or St. Paul, we open ourselves to the reality of what they communicate. The vision is converted from theory into a living truth. This can only be realised when we are turned away from ourselves. This is the movement of prayer.

Scripture (Ezekiel 36:25-29)

I shall pour clean water over you and you will be cleansed; I shall cleanse you of all your filth and of all your foul idols. I shall give you a new heart, and put a new spirit in you; I shall remove the heart of stone from your bodies and give you a heart of flesh instead. I shall put my spirit in you, and make you keep my laws, and respect and practice my judgements. You will be my people and I shall be your God. I shall save you from everything that defiles you.

Wednesday (Augustine Baker, 1575-1641.)

Tepidity is a bitter poisonous root fixed in the minds of negligent Christians, who though out of fear abstain from an habitual practice of sin, yet perform their obligations to God and their brethren sleepily and heartlessly; but in the meantime they remain full of self-love, inward pride and aversion from internal conversation with God. Whereas, if souls would courageously at once give themselves wholly to God, they would find that all things would cooperate, not only to their eternal good, but even to their present contentment and joy.

Scripture (Revelations 3:15-17)

I know about your activities: how you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were one or the other, but since you are neither hot nor cold, but only lukewarm, I will spit you out of my mouth. You say to yourself: I am rich, I have made a fortune and have everything I want, never realising that you are wretchedly and pitifully poor, and blind and naked too.

Thursday (Henri Nouwen)

The Desert Fathers pull us away from our intellectualising practices, in which God becomes one of the many problems we have to address. They show us that real prayer leaves nothing untouched. The prayer of the heart is a prayer that does not allow us to limit our relationship with God to interesting words or pious emotions. In our heart we come to see ourselves as sinners embraced by the mercy of God. The prayer of the heart challenges us to hide absolutely nothing from God and to surrender ourselves unconditionally to his mercy. To the degree that this truth anchors itself in our heart, we will be less distracted by worldly thoughts and more single-mindedly directed towards the Lord.

Scripture (Matthew 3:1-2, 5-8.)

In due course John the Baptist appeared; he proclaimed this message in the desert of Judaea, 'Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is close at hand.' Then Jerusalem and all Judaea and the whole of the Jordan district made their way to him, and as they were baptised by him in the River Jordan they confessed their sins. But when he saw a number of Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism he said to them, 'Brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming retribution? Produce fruits in keeping with repentance.'