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God's Call for a Change of Heart

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God's Call for a Change of Heart

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Second Sunday of Advent

Sunday Readings for December 4, 2011 for Cycle B:

Is 40:1-11; Ps 85:9-14; 2 Pt 3:8-14; Mk 1:1-8

GOD'S CALL FOR A CHANGE OF HEART

Lawrence E. Frizzell

The Sunday and weekday readings of the Liturgy of the Word for Advent evoke the marvelous way in which God prepared his people for the consummation of the plan of redemption. At the same time, however, the coming of God's own Son as Messiah and Redeemer surpassed all expectations, constituting the mystery of faith for Christians. Indeed, Christians realize that with a deep understanding rooted in faith, we need a lifetime to even begin to appreciate the magnitude of the divine gift. Like a jeweler who turns a gem in the light to see its various facets, we must reflect frequently on each aspect of Jesus' life and work to recognize its meaning more fully. This is done best in relation to the Liturgy.

The First Sunday of Advent pointed to the consummation of God's plan "on the day our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 1:8), using a beautiful prayer from Isaiah (63:16-64:7) to remind us of our weakness and great need for redemption. The Second Sunday stresses the need to prepare actively for the coming of Jesus the Teacher and Healer, as well as striving "to be found without stain or defilement and at peace" when Christ returns as Judge (see 2 Pt 3:14).

The first reading is drawn from the beginning of that portion of Isaiah the prophet which dates from the Exile. Survivors of Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. had teachers who interpreted the catastrophe as divine punishment for Israel's sins, especially idolatry. The purpose of the people's servitude was to purify them so that they would respond to their vocation in a deeper way. As always in war, the tragedies of human suffering went totally out of bounds; the people suffered double for all their sins (see Is 40:2).

The anonymous follower of Isaiah's spiritual vision proclaimed that soon God would comfort Jerusalem and allow her children to return. Just as a people would prepare for the visit of their emperor by repairing the roads, so the chosen people must dispose themselves to receive God's redemptive visitation." Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all humankind shall see it together" (Is 40:5). Although recognition of God's impressive presence (glory) must be rooted in faith, the experience of Israel will be a sign to the nations that the one God, Creator of the universe, has a plan for all humanity to enter into divine service after being freed from the servitude of sin.

The Hebrew text of Isaiah is punctuated by Jewish teachers to read as follows: "A voice cries out: 'In the desert prepare the way of the Lord.'" (Is 40:3). This is logical because the prophet must have been in the city; otherwise he would be heard by very few! However, the Greek translation, quoted by the Gospel writer, took on a special significance." A herald's voice in the desert, crying..." was a statement that applied well to the expectations of Jews under the yoke of the Roman Empire. The people whose leaders composed the Dead Sea Scrolls used this very text

to describe their vigilant awaiting in the wilderness for God's coming to deliver Israel. So, long decades before the birth of Jesus, Jews were going into the wilderness for prayer.

John the Baptizer could preach to large crowds in this wilderness near the Jordan River because there was already an expectation that God would reveal himself soon in that very area. Perhaps they recalled that, after forty years in the desert, Joshua had led the Israelites across the Jordan into the promised land near this place. Would the new manifestation of divine power come here as well? This may have been the hope of those who sensed that great things were happening in their time.

John followed the ancient Jewish practice of using water as a symbol of purification. He proclaimed a baptism (immersion) that would be a sign. It showed that people wanted to convert from their sinful practices to a new understanding of obedience to the commandments of God. This call for a change of heart was central to the message of Jesus as well. As we hear it during the Advent season, we should recall our own need to conform more completely to the Master's call. To keep the commandments we need to call upon Christ's gift of the Holy Spirit, bestowed upon us in our baptism. Then, we, like Israel, will become a light to those who are searching for freedom from the oppression of sin so that they can serve the living God.