Healing and Reconciliation

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Third Sunday of Advent
Sunday Readings for December 12, 2010 for Cycle A
Is 35:1-6 and 10; Ps 146:6-10; Jas 5:7-10; Mt 11:2-11

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Can a person measure the importance of a loving family and secure home setting for the tumultuous experience of growing from infancy through adolescence to adulthood? Some people recall that their entire childhood was lived in the same town or city neighborhood. Others acknowledge that the only stability in their lives came from their parents and siblings as they moved to a new country with its enormous challenges. What a tragedy to be separated from one's family! Most of us never imagine what the loss of home and work inflicts upon the millions of people forced to flee because of persecution or war in our century. Many never adjust to new situations but continually yearn to return to their native land. Such people would respond appreciatively to the message of hope offered in Isaiah the prophet.

The text proclaimed this Sunday belongs to the teaching of Isaiah's disciples who carried his spirit of consolation to the people exiled to Babylon. How could their dream of returning to the land of Israel be realized? The long journey through the parched wilderness was daunting, especially for the elderly and those suffering from physical handicaps.

First the prophet reminded the community that God could transform the desert as quickly as the warmth of spring brings abundant blossoms to the desert wadis irrigated by winter rains. Those returning will inherit the verdant pastures of Carmel and Sharon (the area from Haifa to Tel Aviv). Moreover, "they will see the glory of the LORD, the splendor of our God" (Is 35:2). The basis for Israel's hope is the impressive, illuminating presence (glory) of God. Physical or psychological weakness must be overcome through the challenge of the prophet: "Be strong, fear not!" This is a constant refrain of God's message to those facing danger or enormous challenges in their vocation. "Fear not, Abram! I am your shield!" (Gn 15:1). "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God" (Lk 1:30). The reason for the saints to have confidence in spite of human limitations is their faith that God is with them. "Here is your God, he comes with vindication; with divine recompense he comes to save you" (Is 35:4). The righteousness of God will bring judgment upon the wicked so that the persecuted can find liberty.

Not only will the exiled return to their homeland, but those who are blind, deaf or lame will be enabled to make the journey and join in worship within the Jerusalem sanctuary. Thus would they be whole so that they could take on the tasks of living in community and serving in the Temple (see Lv 21:16-23).

The marvelous transformation of people's lives through divine power was a central aspect of Jesus' ministry. John the Baptist, however, had emphasized that the coming Anointed One (Messiah, Christ) would plunge people into the crucible of divine Judgment. "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire (see Isa 11:1-4). His winnowing fan is in his hand. He will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into his barn but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (Mt
3:11-12). With a touch of impatience, perhaps, John challenged Jesus to take up this work. But in his reply, Jesus recalled the hope of the prophets for a healing of human ills so that people could fulfill their call to worship God. Of course, these works of mercy also became signs of the enlightenment of faith and the activation of good will on the part of those whose sins are forgiven. The only real handicap preventing a person from serving God and loving neighbor is sin. Various forms of selfishness cause people to be alienated from God and true liberation begins with freedom from the shackles of sin. Then they will return from spiritual exile and be restored to the fullness of life in God's presence, in the community of his people. In baptism God "delivered us from the power of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Col 1:13-14). During the season of Advent the Church provides opportunities for us to seek reconciliation as our response in gratitude for the ministry of Christ in his work of restoring us to intimacy with the Father through the Holy Spirit. of the kingdom.