

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Today's first reading, from Isaiah, emphasizes that, through his Son, God does all the saving. On the other hand, we must cooperate with God because He cannot force his bounty upon us. That is why John the Baptist, in today's Gospel, summons us to play our essential part – leading lives of repentance, conversion and renewal and thus preparing the way for the Lord's second coming. It is good for us to keep it in mind and prepare for it every year, every day. We might start this process by preparing for the celebration of Christmas, the celebration of the Lord's first coming.

John is prophet on fire with a fiery message: While only two Gospels mention the nativity, all four Gospels introduce Jesus with an account of John the Baptist's ministry. Matthew puts slightly greater emphasis on John's words than on his action of baptizing. He records a direct quote from John's preaching: "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near." words which Jesus later used to begin his own preaching. If we do not bear god fruit for the sake of the Kingdom of God, we might be cut out, and put to the fire- as Jesus also said several times. Like in his parable about the vine branches he says:

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful."

John's message was not soothing. It cut into the very hearts of men. He denounced evil wherever he found it. He accused Herod of living a loose moral life, addressed the Scribes and the Pharisees as "brood of vipers" and summoned people to righteousness.

John justified his call to repentance by announcing that the Kingdom of Heaven was near and that the way to prepare for that day was to repent. Literally, the Greek word for repentance (*teshuvá* in Hebrew and *metanoia* in Greek) means "to change one's mind and heart", a change of direction or a U-turn.

We need to accept John's call for a change of life, in other case we might not bear our fruits in Christ. John's baptism by water was only an external expression of repentance. What he insisted on was repentance that bore real fruit: a turning away from worldly values combined with generosity and love. As a sign of true repentance, John urged the tax collectors to "stop collecting more than what is prescribed", and told the soldiers to "stop extortion and

false accusation and remain satisfied with their wages." In short, John's message was a call for radical conversion, a demand for self-denial, sacrifice and loving service to others.

What can we do?

Obedying the commandments = a good start, but we must also examine our relationships with others. We might start where we are: plenty of opportunities are offered all around. We might mend ruptures and frictions in our relationships, face family responsibilities, work honestly, and treat employees justly or clean our own hearts. John's voice is sober and runs counter to the intoxicating voices even around us today.

We also might need to prepare for Christ's coming by allowing him to be reborn daily in our lives: Advent is the time for us to make this preparation by repenting of our sins, and renewing our lives through prayer, penance, and sharing our blessings with others. Let us remember the oft-repeated words of church father: "What does it profit me if Jesus is reborn in thousands of cribs all over the world and not reborn in my heart?" He means that Jesus must be reborn in our heart, during this season of Advent, and every day of our lives, bringing us love, kindness, mercy, forgiveness and the spirit of humble service.

We need to wait for the second advent of Jesus. John's answer as to how the Jews should wait for the Messiah was that they should wait for the Lord with repentant hearts and reformed lives. We can start by praying from the heart. Let us share our love with others as selfless and humble service. "Do small things but with great love," advise St. Therese of Lisieux and St. Teresa of Calcutta (Mother Teresa).

Saint Paul also encourages us in his letter to the Romans to be brave to go on this path further step by step. He points out that from the Scriptures we might take patience, and strength to fight all for this. We might get encouragement to fight for the Kingdom of God in us. If we do like this we are going to get inner peace that helps us to support each other in growing in Christ's Spirit. We need this very much. Let us remember that it was Christ who supported us first, and be brave enough to support each other like he did it to us in the time of Advent.