

Comfort, With a Catch

2nd Sunday of Advent -- Year B

Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11

Psalms 85:9-10, 11-12, 13-14

2 Peter 3:8-14

Mark 1:1-8

In the play, "Inherit the Wind", Bertram Cates, confronting the ire of his town's religious fervor, stands up in court and declares in utter aggravation: "Religion is supposed to comfort people, not scare them to death!" This is only partially true in its assertion; after all, "the beginning of Wisdom is Fear of the Lord."

When asked what they look for most from religion in general and Christianity in particular, many people, if not most, give the same answer: "Comfort." It is the first thing people seek from faith and the Church, and in many ways, this is what they receive. This "comfort", however, is more than simple moralistic emotional therapy. Ours is comfort with a catch.

C.S. Lewis once wrote, "The Christian religion is, in the long run, a thing of unspeakable comfort. But it does not begin in comfort; it begins in the dismay...and it is no use at all trying to go on to that comfort without first going through that dismay." He goes on to warn, "comfort is the one thing you cannot get by looking for it." Look, instead, he says, for truth. "If you look for truth, you may find comfort in the end: If you look for comfort you will not get either comfort or truth -- only soft soap and wishful thinking...and, in the end, despair" (Mere Christianity, Book



1, Chapter 5).

Through Isaiah the prophet, God declares for his people "*Comfort, give comfort to my people...Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.*" Reading further, however, Isaiah proclaims God's motivation: "*her guilt is expiated...she has received from the hand of the Lord double for all her sins*" (Is 40:1-2). God declares "comfort" at the

conclusion of a long period of penance, and it is in this context that God, through Isaiah, calls on His people to "prepare the way of the Lord."

John the Baptist declares the same message. We read this declaration every year on the Second Sunday of Advent as John calls us now as then to "*make straight his paths*" (Mark 1:3). Like Isaiah, John's declaration to prepare for the immanent coming of the Lord, includes a call to

repentance. The people who heard John's message responded with eagerness, and "prepare[d] the way of the Lord" by "*being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they acknowledged their sins*" (Mark 1:5-6).

The Advent-Christmas cycle of our Liturgical Year is always a joyful one as we engage in the hustle and bustle of preparing for the celebration of the Nativity of Our Lord. During the first couple of weeks of Advent, however, our focus is on our true

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Advent as Followers of Christ; not on the Birth of Jesus, as that has already happened two thousand years ago, in a manger, just outside Bethlehem. Rather, our Christian Advent is in awaiting Christ's Return in Glory, an event for which we wait in joyful hope, and in unspeakable comfort, but with the constant reminder that we must always "prepare the way of the Lord" through repentance and the acknowledgement of our sins.

True comfort comes only after experiencing dismay. For Israel, it was the

dismay of their Exile, after which came the comfort of God's restoration of His People. For John's disciples, it was the dismay of acknowledging their sins, followed by the comfort of their sins washed away in the waters of Baptism. For us, already Baptized, let us progress through our Advent, repenting our sins, undergoing an ongoing conversion, as we prepare the way for the great Return in Glory of our Lord.

Fr. William Nicholas
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