

## SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT (C - 2024)

The Prophet Isaiah wrote many things about the coming of the Lord. For example, he spoke about the circumstances of Christ's birth. He described how the Messiah would establish a kingdom of peace, and of how suffering would end. He talked about how conflicts would cease. Even the lion would lie down with the lamb.

The Prophet Isaiah also talked about how the Israelites were to prepare for the coming of the Lord. In fact, our Holy Gospel today contains a long quote from Isaiah concerning that very point. Let me read it to you again. It says,

**"A voice of one crying out in the desert: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight His paths. Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low. The winding roads shall be made straight and the rough ways made smooth, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"**

So who was Isaiah speaking about? Who was this voice crying in the desert? It was none other than Saint John the Baptist. Our holy gospel tells us that, **"John went throughout the whole region of the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins ..."**

Saint John was the last and greatest of all the prophets; he had received an exalted and glorious mission. His mission was concerned with the saving of souls, with our salvation. It was he who announced that the coming of our Lord was at hand.

Since his mission was a spiritual one, it was essential that Saint John prepare himself in a spiritual way. To prepare himself for this great responsibility, he went into the desert where he fasted and prayed.

At last, when it was time, God told Saint John to go to the people and remind them of the words Isaiah had spoken long ago, **"Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight His paths."** Saint John obeyed the Lord and went throughout the entire region of the Jordan proclaiming a **"baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."**

It's interesting that in ancient times, when someone important came to town, for example, when a king or governor was coming, the people took great pains to get ready. They fixed potholes in the roads. Even the bends and curves were taken out and the steepest parts leveled.

So, when Saint John told the people to make a straight path for the Lord, they knew exactly what He meant; they knew that someone of great importance was coming.

However, Saint John had no intention of organizing work crews to repair the roads. He wasn't interested in fixing ruts or potholes. Rather, his words were symbolic. The Messiah wasn't coming to inspect the cities and villages. Instead, He was coming for spiritual reasons. The Messiah was coming to save the people from their sins. That is why Saint John **"proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."**

It was to help the people understand that the Messiah was coming for spiritual reasons that Saint John washed them in the waters of the Jordan River. That washing also symbolized the people's renunciation of sin. It symbolized their desire to receive the Lord.

Now this is all very interesting, but what about us? In our own times, should we be doing something? The answer is "Yes." We should pay close attention to what the Israelites did and learn a lesson from them. Indeed, during this Advent season, we should remember that before all else, our preparations for the Lord's coming must be spiritual. That means we need to focus not so much on what's outside and what's external, but on what's inside, on what's going on in our hearts.

We must be like the people who came to Saint John the Baptist with a spirit of repentance. Those people long ago came seeking God's forgiveness, and we should do the same. So then, as we prepare to celebrate the Lord's birth, as we prepare to celebrate Christmas, let's look into our hearts, and root out and throw away any and every attachment to sin.

All of us, every single one of us should examine his or her own conscience for any sins or offenses that we may have committed against almighty God, for any rebellious acts against His divine majesty. Then, just like those who came to the Baptist, we too should ask God for pardon and forgiveness. That's how we can make straight the way of the Lord in our own hearts.

Now when Saint John the Baptist began his preaching, Jesus had not yet revealed Himself, and so, while the people received a baptism of repentance which led to the forgiveness of sins, Saint John's baptism did not actually forgive sins. For that, the people had to wait until Jesus redeemed them by His death on the Cross.

However, in our time, the work of Jesus, the Redemption, has been accomplished and that means none of us need dwell in the darkness of sin. Our Baptism truly forgave our sins. In addition, we have something more than the people in Saint John's time. We have the Sacrament of Penance. Jesus gave us this Sacrament to forgive any sins committed after Baptism. Today, this sacrament is the ordinary means by which our sins are forgiven.

In fact, Confession should be an essential part of our preparations for the Lord's coming. Every Catholic who is serious about growing in God's love and about getting to heaven should not only use this Sacrament before Christmas, but should use it regularly. This means at least every month or two. Personally, I try to go every two weeks or so.

With these thoughts in mind then, let me make a few more points about the Sacrament of Penance. First, it's a fact that many people today never go to Confession. Still others don't go regularly, and this is not good. It's not what Jesus wants. He came to save us from our sins. He doesn't want us to be carrying them around like a ball and chain.

So, I want to urge you to get to Confession during Advent. Make up your mind that you are going to go before Christmas and then go. All the more so if you haven't been for some time. You will feel a great peace and liberation and a release from the guilt of sin when you do.

That said, why is it that many people don't use this Sacrament? Well, one reason is obvious. It's because our society has lost a sense of God's holiness and with it, a sense of what is evil. It's not so much that people don't believe in God (although many no longer do). Rather, they have lost a sense of God's holiness and majesty and power and goodness. Along with this, they have also lost a sense of what offends God, namely sin.

Another reason people don't go to confession is because of this pagan culture in which we live. Because we live in it, we can't help but be influenced by it, and one way we've been influenced is that we have become tolerant of the evil that surround us. We have lost our horror of it.

So, things like immodesty or greed or disrespect for authority or lying or living together without marriage or abortion are just part of life. We have become used to sin, not necessarily used to sinning, but used to sin, and that makes it easier to excuse sin or to fall into it ourselves.

Yet another reason many people don't go to confession is that they don't think they need to go, but that is not true. We need to understand that sin is a rebellion against the Creator of the universe; it is an offense against the sovereign majesty of God. That means sin is not a trivial thing. It is something serious, and it must be treated in a serious way. As a reminder of just how serious sin is, consider that to save us from our sins, Jesus had to suffer and die on the cross.

You might think about it this way. Suppose you accidentally broke a family heirloom, let's say some vase your grandmother had. You wouldn't just say to your mom, "Oh well, easy come, easy go, sorry about that." Not at all. Instead, you would be in anguish and would think very carefully about what you would say and how you would express your sorrow.

So too with sin, we don't just say to God, "Oops, sorry God. I guess I screwed up but no big deal. We're cool." No. Our sinful offenses require a formal apology, not just a flippant, offhanded one, and that formal apology takes place in the Sacrament of Penance.

So at this point, let's review how to make a good confession. First, examine your conscience. Think of when it was that you last went to Confession. Next, identify the sins you committed since your last worthy confession. An easy way to do this is to go through the commandments.

Second, have contrition for your sins. That means two things, being sorry, and having the intention of turning away from sin, of resolving to change your life and to avoid what leads you into sin. Third, after you have examined your conscience, confess your sins. Note here this must include any and all the mortal sins you can recall since your last worthy confession. The priest will then give you absolution. Finally, go and you do your penance. That's it. That's all you have to do.

Going to Confession regularly has many benefits. It helps us grow closer to God. We become more aware of our sins and consequently are more able to do something about them. We have the assurance of God's forgiveness. Our questions are answered. Our souls are relieved and unburdened, and we receive God's grace.

So then, use this Advent time to prepare for the coming of the Lord. Make straight His path into your hearts by going to Confession and receiving God's forgiveness. Do that and your soul will be ready to receive the Christ Child on Christmas Day. Amen.