

Repent and Believe

By Rev. Brian Mullady, O.P.

December 8, 2019 – Second Sunday of Advent

Readings: Isaiah 11.1-10; Romans 15.4-9; Matthew 3.1-12

When St. Thomas Aquinas examined the important issue of justification, he rightly distinguished it from the virtue of justice. The virtue of justice refers to a quality formed in the will by which people easily respect and give others their rights. Justification, on the other hand, refers to the inner integrity in which all the powers of the soul connected with freedom of choice – the intellect, the will, and the passions – are united in action toward the only good that can bring true happiness, our union with God in heaven. Justification thus implies peace of soul and integrity of character.

This peace can be brought about only by grace because it involves an intimate union with God. It includes the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the virtues that are needed to live a truly Godlike life in this world. Adam and Eve had these things before the Original Sin, and so they were at peace with God, the world, and themselves. They were justified. All that was lost by sin, however. So justification was lost by sin.

Christ Restores Peace

Yet, since the loving God wanted to people heaven and so to return man to a condition in which he could experience inner healing, he promised the coming of the One who would restore justification to man. The Messiah was promised at the outset in Genesis 3.15. “I will put enmity between you and the woman; and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” The whole history of the human race until Christ’s birth was preparation for that coming, and the season of Advent celebrates that by encouraging us to repent in a way that takes seriously the justification Christ brought to us.

For justification to be complete, it must consist of a conversion with two distinct moments. The *Catechism* states: “Justification is not only the remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man.” These two aspects form the essence of the message of John the Baptist: “Repent (remission of sins), and for the kingdom of heaven is at hand! (sanctification and interior renewal)” (Mt 3.2). This same summary is repeated by Christ in Matthew 4.17.

Conversion means turning from one thing to its opposite. I face in one direction and then turn to face in the opposite direction. In the case of redemption, such a turning is accomplished by the atonement of Christ. Atonement also has a twofold character. Christ undertakes one of the punishments for the Original Sin (suffering and death). By his perfect obedience he satisfies for the offense, and then he completes this satisfaction by sending the Holy Spirit back into the souls of the human race.

The prophet Isaiah describes the atoning Christ in his prophecy about the shoot of Jesse. A branch grows from the human lineage of Jesse because Christ takes his sacred humanity from Mary. But he is not just an engraced human being: “The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him” (Is 11.2). Since he is the divine Person of the Word already existing with a divine nature, in the womb of Mary he takes on human nature but not human personhood, and so his humanity itself is holy (anointed, messiah, Christ).

Jesus has the fullness of grace, the virtues, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which is far more than some emotional confidence in salvation. Three of the gifts, wisdom, science, and understanding, involve his divine intelligence, which the Messiah reveals in truly judging the heart: “He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor” (Is 11.3-4).

The other gifts of the Holy Spirit complete this knowledge with the spirit of love. This love caused by truth is the means by which the world achieves peace. “The earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as water covers the sea” (Is 11.9), and thus begins the progressive healing of the world. This healing is reflected in nature, as predators and prey will lie down together, and the child will not be harmed by the serpent. The human race also attests to this peace by a universal union of mankind, both Jew and Gentile: “For I say Christ became a minster of the circumcised to show God’s truthfulness to confirm the promises of the patriarchs, and so that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy” (Rom 15.8-9).

John, the Last Prophet

John the Baptist is the last prophet who immediately prepares for Christ after all the centuries of waiting. His clothing and food reflect the simplest life, and his message demands more than superficial external deeds or emotional sorrow.

The two principal governing groups of Israel come to spy on John. The Pharisees want to investigate the political implications of his message. They were the professional holy men of Israel and had great influence, even though they had no specific political role. The Sadducees were the rationalists of their day. They were high priests with official influence but were cynical and indifferent to the political authorities, provided those authorities kept them in office. The Sadducees were unpopular with the people.

Both groups hear John but are not terribly interested in his message of interior justification. They do not repent and are not converted. The Pharisees think their external observances are all that is needed; the Sadducees are uninterested in such questions. Though heirs of the law and the prophets, both interpret repentance as merely a matter of external practice. John rightly sees through their intent and condemns their superficiality: “Bear fruit that represents repentance, and so not presume to say to yourself, ‘we have Abraham for our father’” (Mt 3.8-9). The Lord will cut down all trees not bearing fruit from a true conversion of heart.

John’s baptism prepares for such a conversion of heart. It goes far beyond the ritual washing performed by Jews after being in contact with Gentiles. And yet it is not directly connected to the dying and risen Christ’s atoning for sin and sending the Holy Spirit. Those who embrace the baptism of John participate in an interim event, something between the Old Law and the perfection of the New Law. John proclaims as much by saying he is less than a slave to “the one coming after” (Mt 3.11), for he is not fit to carry even his sandals. The one coming after will baptize with “the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Mt 3.11). The Pharisees and the Sadducees fail to grasp his meaning.

Conversion through Penance

Today, the change of heart or conversion through repentance that John advises is offered to all who believe in the coming of Christ. The sacraments of repentance are baptism and penance. All validly baptized Christians have received sanctifying grace. During Advent, John’s message is an invitation to deepen, through penance joyfully born, our own conversion. This will mean a change of heart that goes beyond superficial emotional sorrow for sin and accomplishes a true renewal of mind and heart.

If our repentance is to be true, we must confess all our remembered mortal sins, in kind and number. Acknowledging these demonstrates where each of us needs healing in our inner life through the ongoing process of our conversion. Each Christian is asked to make his soul a new manger in which Christ can be born anew spiritually.

Advent is an invitation for each us to integrate in our lives today’s responsorial psalm: “Justice shall flourish in his time and fullness of peace forever.” The justice spoken of here is the right ordering of a soul formed anew, despite suffering, by the light of Christ born into the heart at Christmas. If rightly ordered, our souls escape the “unquenchable fire” (Mt 3.12) reserved for those who fail to repent. Moreover, we bear the fruit of the virtues in everyday life in our actions toward those around us.

For continual renewal we need within us the fire of the Holy Spirit, who makes our repentance a result of love. Only this grace will heal our souls and bring true peace. That peace is the fruit of a rightly ordered conscience straining on to heaven. Come, Lord Jesus!

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For Further Reading

- Jimmy Akin, [*"Who Was St. John the Baptist? \(11 Things to Know and Share\)"*](#)
- "The Beginning of Faith" [*\(interview with Benedict XVI\)*](#)
- Catechism of the Catholic Church, [*##1987-2029*](#)
- Cole Desantis, [*"Christ's Atonement: More than Just Payment for Sin"*](#)

In Short . . .

- *God wanted to return man to a condition in which he could experience inner healing, so he promised the coming of the One who would restore justification to man.*
- *For justification to be complete, it must consist of a conversion with two distinct moments, the remission of sins and the sanctification and renewal of the interior.*
- *John the Baptist is the last prophet who prepares for Christ after centuries of waiting, and his message demands more than superficial external deeds or emotional sorrow.*
- *To all who believe in the coming of Christ, the change of heart through repentance that John advises is offered through the sacraments.*
- *True peace is the fruit of a rightly ordered conscience straining on to heaven, and only grace will heal our souls and bring that peace.*