

Dearly beloved,

Today we mark the Second Sunday of Advent, a time of preparation for Christmas and a time of preparation for the return of Our Lord from heaven. It is also a time to recall the promises made to the chosen people, and to rejoice in their fulfillment in Christ. The Gospel for today's Mass reminds us of the signs that were foretold by the prophets and which Jesus worked while He walked the earth, in order to convince the people of His day that He was the Messiah. As a way to get his disciples to become disciples of Christ, St. John the Baptist sends them to Jesus to ask Him if He was the Messiah. Christ responds by listing the miracles He had worked, and in so doing He was also quoting the prophets, and thus fulfilling their prophecies.

Most of the miracles that Jesus performed were foretold by Isaiah, in a particularly notable way in the 35<sup>th</sup> chapter of his prophecy. It says, "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; ... it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. ... They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God... Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy." In this we see that just as in today's account, the works are material, but they are such things as only God can do. Even the Pharisees could not argue against such logic, for when the man born blind was healed by Jesus, as recounted in the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of John, they had to admit that "Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." If it had only been that one miracle, perhaps it could have been simply said that this man was from God, but with each new miracle it had to be said that not only was this man from God, he was God.

Thus the Gospel conveys to us the kind of excitement that must have surrounded Christ, for those whose hearts were open to receive Him. And yet there is one work mentioned that seems out of place, though it too was foretold by Isaiah: the poor have the good news preached to them. What is the significance of this action of Christ? Why would it be in accord with His divine mission? And what makes it extraordinary?

First of all, it proves the truth of Our Lord's mission, in distinction to other prophets and other religions. If God were indeed to come among us, He would not need to appeal to the rich and the powerful, for He already possesses all such things and He would not need their assistance in bringing about His plan of reform or His new religious program. Thus it is that even today we know the veracity of the Catholic Church from its care for the poor and for Her willingness to risk the odium of the wealthy and the strong so that the Gospel may be preached in its integrity. If a so-called church offers hope only to the rich and to those in power, it is not real.

Second, preaching to the poor is what a true Savior would do, since He knows that man is broken by sin, and that poverty makes us vulnerable enough to see that. Being poor has many advantages, one of them being that our lack of material stability moves us to rely upon God, and from there we can see our need for reliance upon Him in the spiritual realm as well. It also makes sense that a God-sent redeemer would also save that which needs to be saved: He is the Savior of the sick, for man is sick. He has not come for the healthy, for they need no physician. And He has come for the poor, because man is poor, he is lacking the spiritual perfections he needs in order to be happy, both grace and virtue, and thus he needs someone to fill him. Finally, the poor man may never receive the kinds of consolations the rich receive in this life, and so he needs to be promised eternal life—only God can promise such a thing, and that is what Jesus did promise.

This preaching to the poor and even encouraging His followers to embrace poverty is a definitive mark of the Gospel. Besides the frequent admonitions to sell what we have and give to the poor and then follow Him, there are the beatitudes, the basis of Christian morality, and their counterparts, what one might call the ‘maledictudes.’ In the sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” or as Luke records it, “Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.” Luke also tells us that Jesus had a saying for the rich, “But woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation.” Even though the beatitudes always have a mystical quality to them, we can at least see that we should desire to be one thing and not the other, for if this life is all the consolation we are getting, we are a sorry lot. But if our reward is the kingdom of heaven, how blessed are we.

So how can we foster our poverty, both materially and spiritually? I wish to give just a short mention of one way in each realm. In the material realm, we can choose inconvenience. In the late 1960s, an orthodox monk by the name of Seraphim Rose founded a modest monastery in northern California. As the site of the monastery, he deliberately chose a place where he would have neither running water nor electricity, and have to walk a considerable distance to get to the well. He knew that such inconveniences would keep his body from becoming soft and would keep his soul alert. So also we can choose to do without things we would otherwise be able to afford, for the sake of spiritual benefit. It is not infrequently our desire that when we have enough money we will build the perfect house, or the perfect kitchen or bathroom, or that we will buy the perfect car or have our yard perfectly landscaped. It is good to avoid such thinking, and even think of how we can leave some significant inconvenience in place to teach us humility in doing hard and tedious tasks. In running our day of retreat here yesterday, it became evident to me how draining the arrangement of our plant can be, how inadequate the bathrooms and other amenities. But that is good. It is often said of well-established monasteries that the best days, the days when the most spiritual profit was gained, were when things were simpler, the work was harder, and the monks took nothing for granted.

In the spiritual realm, we can be content with emptiness. Just as the poor person learns to live with an empty belly, so we can accept our empty souls so that God may fill them. This may seem obscure, but it means that in those times when we feel most helpless, most weak, and most in danger of falling into sin or despair, these are the times in which Christ is calling us to approach nearer to the Cross and be filled with His life-giving Blood. These are times that expose who we really are—sinners in need of a Savior, creatures fully dependent upon our Creator. And if we never experience these times, we are not living an examined life, we are too distracted.

In his treatise on the Incarnation of the Word, St. Athanasius develops a brilliant explanation of this: “men, having despised and rejected the contemplation of God, and devised and contrived evil for themselves received the condemnation of death with which they had been threatened; and from thenceforth no longer remained as they were made, ...For transgression of the commandment was turning them back to their natural state, ...For if, out of a former normal state of non-existence, they were called into being by the Presence and loving-kindness of the Word, it followed naturally that when men were bereft of the knowledge of God and were turned back to what was not (for what is evil is not, but what is good is), they should, since they derive their being from God who IS, be everlastingly bereft even of being; in other words, that they should be disintegrated and abide in death and corruption.”

The moments in which we feel helpless and despairing, the moments in which our faith is tested, these are moments in which we hang in balance between life and death, and these are moments of the most profound grace. There can be no greater joy than realizing that we are indeed in need of a Savior, not just in the abstract, but right now. I am convinced that the Saints are the ones who treasure these moments and look upon them as blessings, for they are times in which St. Paul’s teaching becomes manifest in me, and so gives glory to God: “I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong.” It is being poor that we allow Our Lord to make us rich, and thus He accomplishes His work in us, and we lovingly receive a share in His power.

As Advent progresses in its quick fashion this year, may we consider how Jesus came to preach His message of redemption to the poor, and then strive to become poor in some concrete way, both in spirit and in body. In so doing, we will make ourselves more open to His grace and to His dwelling within us, and thus open ourselves to true joys. May Our Lady intercede for us that we will have the courage to do so, she who risked all things to give herself completely to God. And then may she welcome us into the kingdom promised to the poor in spirit, where we shall adore the One who has shed His Blood for us, the lover of mankind, unto the ages of ages.