

‘Do not presume to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our father!” ’

Mt 3:9

Last week we considered an aspect of Isaiah’s message – the idea of climbing the mountain of the Lord – and suggested that making a *particular examen* each evening to root out anything that may have become an habitual sin was a good way to start climbing that mountain this Advent. Isaiah’s message is drawn out over sixty or more chapters in the Old Testament, and today we hear more of his message as he describes the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit that will rest on the Messiah when He makes His appearance (the same Seven Gifts that we are given in the Sacrament of Confirmation) and the restored harmony throughout the whole of creation that will exist on the mountain of the Lord once His judgement on a fallen humanity has come to pass.

Sin is defined as *an offence against God*. When someone does us harm, we get offended. By that we mean we feel upset, or hurt, or betrayed. Or, as we might say, our nose is put out of joint. But when there is an offence against God we do not mean that He gets upset the way we do, or that He takes umbrage as we might, and that He goes into a corner and sulks, or that He gets bad tempered. No, when we say that sin offends God we mean, chiefly, that the good order of things is upset; that the scales of justice have become imbalanced in which is measured whether we have given to God and to others what we *should* have given to them. And when these scales of divine justice become imbalanced, the fabric of the created order is torn, and things become, as we might say these days, out of sync. The harmony and union between God and His creatures – and even between one creature and another – is no longer synchronized: everything is out of kilter. And when this happens, harm, and upset, and disorder follow on.

So when Isaiah describes a restored harmony, such that ‘the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together,’ he is telling us how things should always have been from the beginning, and how things will be once more when the work of our redemption is accomplished by the coming Messiah.

This is the hope that St Paul is referring to in today’s Second Reading, the encouragement that we find in the Scriptures. But by the time we get to today’s Gospel passage, we find St John the Baptist – the one of whom Our Lord said that none greater of woman had ever been born (Mt 11:11) – preaching in a remarkably forthright manner about the consequences of *not* co-operating with the work of redemption that the Son of God has come to bring.

‘You brood of vipers!’ he cries to the hypocrites who appear to stand righteous before God but who don’t always practise what they preach. ‘Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?’

We sit comfortably today, knowing that those words were directed at others, but it is the comfort and the complacency of the Pharisees, more than their hypocrisy, that the Baptist is decrying: they think they are already doing everything that has been asked of them and can, therefore, do no more! Can we be so sure that we are not making the same mistake? ‘Do not presume to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our father!” ’

John’s message to us today – two thousand years after he put forth his cry in the wilderness – is the same as it was to the Pharisees then: complacency and a sense of comfort in what we are doing, and the idea that we are doing enough, is a far greater threat to our spiritual well-being than almost anything else in our lives today. Just as we have all become materially comfortable in our over-fed, Western, consumer society, so we have become inert

in our spiritual lives, settling for the familiar instead of daring to be ambitious for the higher gifts, as St Paul says elsewhere (1 Cor 12:31).

I urge you, as I urged you last week, to treat this Advent as the penitential season it is. It may not have the rigour of Lent, but it still makes demands on us, and if we would have an authentically rich and fruitful Christmas – as opposed to a stale and desiccated Yuletide – then we need to prepare a suitable gift to lay beside the manger on Christmas Day.

If you have not yet started to climb the mountain of the Lord, begin today. Make an Advent resolution, and pray for God's grace to help you keep it. Start today to prepare in your heart a way for the Lord, and make straight the path in your life that will lead to Him.

St Paul, in today's Second Reading, reminds us that promises were made to the patriarchs of old. If we wish to see those promises fulfilled in our own lives, then we would do well to adopt a prayer life in the next few weeks that reflects the meaning of this season, so that, come Christmas, we might gather together on the Lord's own mountain.