

**Second
Sunday
of Advent**

Year B



FIRST READING
Isaiah 40:1–5, 9–11

PSALM
Psalm 85:9–14

SECOND READING
2 Peter 3:8–14

GOSPEL
Mark 1:1–8

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PRAYER

Psalm 85:9–14

Let me hear
what God the LORD will speak,
for he will speak peace
to his people,
to his faithful, to those
who turn to him in their hearts.
Surely his salvation is at hand
for those who fear him,
that his glory may dwell in our land.
Steadfast love
and faithfulness will meet;
righteousness and peace
will kiss each other.
Faithfulness will spring up
from the ground,
and righteousness will look down
from the sky.
The LORD will give what is good,
and our land will yield its increase.
Righteousness will go before him,
and will make a path for his steps.

**READING
THE WORD**

First Reading
Isaiah 40:1–5, 9–11

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,

and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received
from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.
A voice cries out:
"In the wilderness
prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert
a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill
be made low;
the uneven ground
shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
Then the glory of the Lord
shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."
Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
"Here is your God!"
See, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,

and gently lead the mother sheep.

Second Reading
2 Peter 3:8–14

But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.
Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish.

Gospel**Mark 1:1-8**

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,

who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

HEARING THE WORD**"Eliminating Obstacles"**

The Advent season is meant to be a time of preparation for the encounter with the Lord. We know that Jesus has already come as a little child born in Bethlehem many years ago. We also know that he will come in glory at the end of time. Still, the same Jesus comes continually into our lives at this very time, in the midst of our ordinary occupations. Yet, we often miss these moments of encounter. Therefore, preparation for welcoming the Lord includes changing or

eliminating some of our attitudes or behaviour which prevent him from being a part of our lives.

The first reading comes from the opening section of the second part of the Book of Isaiah where the prophet announces the approaching deliverance of the Jewish people from the Babylonian exile. The prophets saw the great tragedy of Israel's destruction and exile in 586 BC as a direct result of the godless lives of its leaders and people. Indeed, many saw it as God's just punishment for the violation of the Covenant, and thought that God had abandoned his people for good. Isaiah's words of comfort offer a different perspective on the entire situation. He relates the words which God asked him to deliver, "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God". This message contains the repetition of three verbs: "comfort", "speak tenderly" and "cry to". Together they convey a forceful message that God is neither a God of vengeance nor a distant God. Israel's God is close to his people and, in the words of Isaiah, "The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together for the mouth of the Lord has spoken". This is a message of hope - called in the verses that follow, "good tidings", which means "good news". This news aims at making people aware of God's continuing tender care; despite the tragedy of the exile God intends to bring his people back home. To make this point even

clearer, the prophet uses the image of an attentive shepherd who "will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep".

Still, in order for this great promise to come true it is necessary to "prepare the way of the Lord" and make straight "a highway for our God", which needs to be done "in the wilderness" and "in the desert". These words do not mean that the Israelites have to build a road through the desert to march back to their homeland. Rather, the prophet alludes to "the Exodus" - Israel's journey through the desert of Sinai on their way from the slavery of Egypt and into the Promised Land. It was in the wilderness of Sinai that the Israelites had to learn how to trust God unconditionally and allow him to lead them to the land filled with life through stretches of the barren and hostile wilderness. In order to follow God, they had to overcome their fear, abandon illusions, and renounce doubt. Saying "Here is your God!", Isaiah invites the people to do exactly the same - to get up, lift up their voices, acknowledge that the Lord is present with them, and then begin a long journey back to the homeland they had lost.

The second reading tackles another issue related to the Lord's coming. The second Letter of Peter is addressed to a community of believers in Asia Minor who have been influenced by

false teachers who denied the second coming of the Lord (parousia). Since the expected arrival of the risen Lord was evidently delayed and the promised judgement had not materialised quickly, many Christians had found their arguments convincing and, as a result, had lost hope that it would ever happen. In doing so, they had also begun to question the truthfulness of the Lord's promise to return. In this community, disillusionment and impatience prevented people from waiting patiently and faithfully for the Lord. The author writes to calm their fears and doubts. First, he states that the Lord does not count time as we do, since, for him "one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day". Thus, they cannot expect the human understanding of what "soon" means to be the same as the Lord's. Second, the delay of the parousia is motivated by his love and forbearance. By postponing his arrival the Lord is giving ample opportunity for the wrongdoers to repent. Thus, instead of worrying about the apparent delay, the community members should make use of the available time to live a morally upright life of peace and purity as they wait patiently for the Lord's return.

The Gospel passage contains the very beginning of the Gospel of Mark, which is read on Sundays of the liturgical year "B". The evangelist begins his Gospel citing the words of the prophet Isaiah and applying them to the life and mission of John the Baptist, who is to be the "messenger" and "voice of

one crying in the desert", the voice "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins". Just like Isaiah, John is to prepare the people to encounter the Lord in their lives. John did so by calling the people to a personal and moral conversion by turning away from sin. Sin is an obstacle that separates a person from God and "paralyzes" him or her in the relations with others, as shown in the story of Jesus' healing of a paralytic (Mark 2:1-12). John knew that in order to welcome Jesus in their midst the people of Israel had to eliminate such obstacles. When these were removed, people would be open to receive Jesus who would then "baptize with the Holy Spirit", and thus lead them to a whole new life. For this reason, Mark shows that confession of sins is the first step towards recognising and welcoming Jesus in one's life, just as it was for the "people from whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem" when they descended into the waters of Jordan.

Both God and Jesus continue to be active in human history. Yet, some steps have to be taken in order to recognize and respond to their presence. Isaiah calls for renunciation of fear, delusion and doubt in order to welcome and follow God, even through the wilderness. The author of 2 Peter argues for patience and trust even if the Lord does not appear in such an immediate and apparent way as some of his readers expected. The Christian life should be one of active waiting in trust and faithfulness to the Lord's

teaching. In the Gospel, Mark indicates that sin is a major obstacle that needs to be removed before the Lord's presence can have full effect in one's life through the action of the Holy Spirit. Forgiveness of sin, although the work of the Lord himself, also requires human decision and initiative, as shown by those who came to receive John's baptism. It is within a person's power to change or eliminate the obstacles that obstruct God's action in daily life. When this happens, in the words of the Psalmist "steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other" – and the Lord will fill life with his blessings.

LISTENING TO THE WORD OF GOD

Jesus came to live among us on earth more than two thousands of years ago. However, as Christians, we believe in his continuing presence – he continues to come to us every day. Often we do not pay attention to those opportune moments in which he is present with us. This could be because of our bad behaviour which can "exile us" from his presence, as seen in the first reading from the prophet Isaiah. We can indeed exile ourselves from our very self and immerse ourselves in the world of the latest iPhones, laptops, fashions and other enticing pursuits. To prevent ourselves from being swallowed up by these things, we have to keep in mind that every act has its own consequences and be mindful of what can enslave

us. For the people of Israel, their violations of the Covenant led to the loss of their homeland and the exile. For us, it could lead to separating ourselves from our families and friends, the break-up of relationships and even death. Let us keep in mind that whenever we exile ourselves from God, we fall into slavery. We might have everything materially but we still find ourselves unhappy. This sense of unhappiness is not coming from God but from us.

Focus on Jesus' abiding presence can keep us free from enslavement, it can free us from subjection to what has already claimed our lives. One way to make this happen is to remove the obstacle of mutual hostility. In Africa these days, people in the same village or from different clans are killing one another for various reasons. We have tribal clashes not only in the villages but even in our big cities, places of work and academic institutions. Because this or that person does not speak my local language, I refuse to help him or her. Within families, people are not speaking to each other. At our places of work or in school we shout at those who are our subordinates. These are the mountains and valleys we are called to level to allow Jesus to come into our lives and communities. We are also called to make straight the roads linking parents to children, and children to parents and friends and neighbours. As Christians we have one Lord, the one and only Lord whose coming we commemorate. One

of the best ways to welcome him is to make our relationships with others right.

Another way of keeping ourselves open to Jesus' presence is patience. In the second reading we are encouraged never to lose hope in God. We have a way of measuring time which is different from God's. Knowing that, we should never be tempted to lose hope in God because of the difficult situations that we live in or because our expectations are not met. This is true in our personal life, but also when it comes to political systems that are very oppressive in some parts of Africa. Being patient in such situations means not allowing ourselves to be affected by the evil they practice, but opposing it by a life of Christian virtue. By our patience we bring about change. We cannot keep on expecting others to be the first to change; we have to be the ones to take the first step. By being proactive in this way and not giving up easily, we allow Jesus to be present in this world through us.

PROVERB

*“The fish that
swims against
the current
tastes the best.”*

ACTION

Self-examination:

How is my relationship with those around me? Do I build bridges or walls between them and me?

What is it that has enslaved me so much that I cannot live in harmony with the people around me?

Response to God:

In my personal prayers, I will recall all those whom I have offended and ask for their pardon, and I will forgive those who have offended me.

Response to your World:

I will make it a point to smile, call and chat with friends or relatives from whom I have exiled myself.

As a group, we shall get a chain and place it on the table in the middle of us. We shall recall all our actions or behaviours that enslave us and ask God to break the chain of such attitudes.

PRAYER

*Lord Jesus,
as we prepare
to celebrate your birth,
help me to be reconciled
with you, my friends
and family members,
so that together
we may celebrate
the joy of our salvation,
which you bring to us
through your birth.
We ask this
through Christ our Lord.*