

Sermon for 2nd Sunday of Advent 2022.12.04

May the words of my mouth...

Dear Friends,

Today's Gospel reading gives us an unforgettable image of John the Baptist. The Gospel invites us to contemplate his vocation and to learn from him how we can apply his advice and his life-example to our own lives.

The Gospel of Matthew quotes a prophesy, that of Isaiah. John is the voice in the wilderness of which the Prophet spoke. The prophesy is set within a historical setting. At that time, if a war was planned, somebody would run before the king to announce his arrival. John the Baptist is this person, who proclaims the arrival of our King, who is not a king of war, but the king of peace.

In the Byzantine/Eastern tradition of the Church, John is called the rose of the wilderness. On one of his feast days -- he has several during the Church-year -- we sing: the wilderness blossomed with the appearing of John.

There is a lot of conjecture about John, as well innumerable pictures, icons, and representations. But my question is, What is it that we can truly know about this prophet, about this prototype of the prophets?

John is the child of an old priest and of an old woman: Zechariah and Anna. The woman is long past childbearing age. This elderly couple may have experienced a great sense of shame because of their childlessness. In the Old Testament, if somebody did not have any children that meant they had sinned, secretly or by inheritance. But the Lord is gracious to this old couple, Zechariah and Elisabeth, and in spite of the usual life process of old age, he gifts them with a child, one who will have an extraordinary calling or vocation.

John was a Nazirite. This means that he never drank alcohol and that a razor had never touched his head, so in other words he never shaved or cut his hair. He lived in the wilderness. His meals were wild honey and locust.

The prophets, and later the hermits, collected locusts during the night because at night the wilderness cools down, and locusts being affected by the change in temperature cannot jump to escape. So it was during the night they collected the locusts to cook them in salt water. They then dipped the locusts in honey and ate them.

On one occasion I participated in a biblical conference and a Baptist pastor brought honey and locust and locust for us to taste. To tell the truth, it was not bad. But now after many years, I do not want to eat them again.

John living in the wilderness is significant. The people of Israel, before they entered the Promised Land lived for forty years in the wilderness, where God cared for them. Jesus, before his public ministry of teaching and healing, went into the wilderness for forty days.

Perhaps you know that I love the Hebrew language. I call it my first love among languages, the second is Greek. Anyway, in Hebrew the wilderness is called 'midbar'. This word means not just the wilderness but, the real meaning of it; wordless.

So, the wilderness is a wordless place, a place where you cannot meet with anybody. It is place where you exist in silence. The wilderness is therefore a good place to hear the word of God and to receive from God our calling and to understand the essence of our lives. Why? Because in the noisy world of our everyday lives, it is hard to hear God. God's presence is best experienced in silence. God will not necessarily part the clouds and shout at us to tell us what we should do, but in the silence of our room, during prayer -- and I mean personal prayer -- we can converse with the Lord.

I want to say one more thing.

The Eastern church tradition has a longer Advent than we do. It starts on the 17th of November, and it is a kind of Lent before Christmas. The Eastern church calls this time: the darkness of the ancestors, meaning the darkness of the Old Testament because they didn't know Jesus. „I am the light of the world,“ said the Lord, but the people of the Old Testament didn't receive this light. They were in darkness. For us of course, the whole Bible has a new and more perfect perspective because it has perfect illumination through Christ, the light of the world.

In Europe, we can experience something of this. In this season of the year, it is getting darker day by day. We are physically in the darkness of the ancestors. But how can we use this darkness in our spiritual lives to our advantage? In the darkness, our vision is affected and limited; but at the same time, as with many blind people, our hearing becomes better, more acute.

Have any of you walked or hiked in the forest during the night? Every little noise seems louder. On one occasion I walked at night in the woods with some friends of mine. It turned out to be not just a simple night trip but a trial of sorts. In the forest there was a brook. We could hear the water flowing. But we couldn't see how wide the brook was. And our challenge was to jump over it. There was just one foolish guy (me) who was brave enough to jump across. The brook, which sounded to us like a wide river, was maybe only 50 cm wide, a couple of feet wide...

In the darkness we long for the light, and it is the same in the spiritual darkness. We desire light, the true light: Jesus. „I long for the Lord more than sentries (watchmen) long for the dawn.“ This passage from Psalm 130 shows us our situation at this time while we wait for the coming Saviour. And it is our challenge to jump over the spiritual brook, so that we might jump into the arms of God.

I would like to encourage us to use the wilderness and the darkness imagery and in the silence to be attentive to the word of God and in the darkness to yearn for the light.

This is what John the Baptist teaches us. We need to prepare ourselves to be a messenger and to be a voice in the wilderness, and that we should learn it in silence, in the presence of God. As a Christian, this is our vocation, the calling of each of us. Not just of priests and the

committed laity, but of all baptized people. If we do it and do it without shame, we show our commitment to Christ. The wilderness around us will blossom. I mean by this that the world will become a better place through the leaven of faith, and like John the Baptist we will become like roses in the desert. Such a wonderful utopia and vision: the whole of Christianity as a beautiful garden which announces and shines forth with the glory of God.

Dear friends, we need to do everything to make this more than a utopia. We need through God's working within us allow it to become our reality. Let us make the first step along this path this Advent!

Amen.