

## COMFORT AND CHALLENGE

In about the year, 586 BC, the Babylonian Empire concluded a two year siege against Jerusalem. The city fell. The king was taken prisoner. The temple that had already been raided once was destroyed. The walls of the city were torn down and nearly all the Jewish inhabitants were forcibly relocated hundreds of miles away across the desert in what is now present day Iraq. There they remained for seventy years where obviously most of them died but where their children lived on and continued their hope.

On author noted that catastrophe didn't destroy their hope but purified it. After the seventy years they returned home, to a home they had never seen. This is the context in which we hear God speak through the Prophet Isaiah: *Comfort, give comfort to my people...her service is at an end...her guilt is expiated...in the desert prepare the way of the Lord...The glory of the Lord shall be revealed.*

Comfort. God comforts his people. God's glory is revealed in the return from exile although God's glory will be revealed even more tremendously through the coming of Christ. The people had fallen into sins that they chose. They had to face the consequences of what they had done and yet now we hear of comfort. Give comfort to my people. God is a god of Justice and yet he is also revealed as the one who comforts.

Jump ahead a few centuries to the Gospel. We again find those words, Prepare the way of the Lord. In the desert we find someone both fascinating and somewhat frightening: John the Baptist. He was preparing the way of the Lord. John the Baptist challenged people.

John challenged people to get ready for the coming of the Christ. He challenged people to turn around, that is to repent. To open their minds and hearts to God to change they way they lived. To repent isn't just to turn away from what is bad but to embrace what is good; to reorient our lives more deeply in goodness and truth. John called people to face up to what they had done wrong, to confess their sins and then to embrace what was good. He didn't hesitate to challenge people to live their faith. He forcefully called people to live lives of intentional faith.

Some people, most notably Herod, that challenge and this cost John the Baptist his life. God is also revealed as the one who challenges us. The God who comforts us is also the God who challenges us. Challenge can be a polite way of referring to something that you don't want to hear; that tells you something that you don't want to do but often may be something you know you should do.

Comfort and challenge: these are both essential elements of the Gospel. Jesus comes to save us. That should give us comfort. Jesus is the word of God made flesh, truly God and truly human who out of love for us dies and rises again. That too should comfort us. Jesus is true hope as we realize that the love of God is stronger than sin and death. That too should comfort us but it should also challenge us.

The love of God isn't to make us complacent and smug but to draw us out of ourselves so we can be generous. God's mercy doesn't mean we can do whatever but that in his mercy, God has a better plan for us, a better road for us to walk down. If the Gospel doesn't challenge you, the next question to ask is if you were asleep. It's the job of the Gospel to challenge us to move us forward, even to tell us what we don't want to hear.

St. John Paul II said, *The Gospel does not promise a comfortable life to anyone. It makes demands and, at the same time, it is a great promise--the promise of eternal life.* All you have to do is listen to a few of Jesus' words to realize all of this. This involves our personal life, our social and business life and even our political life. No matter what your political persuasion may be, chances are that at some point your Church will say something that you don't like, something you find challenging.

Comfort and challenge. In the Christian life, the two go together. Challenge without the comfort becomes harsh and can lead us to despair. Comfort without the challenge makes us weak and complacent. Like any good teacher, like any good coach, like any good parent God, leads us in the ways of both comfort and challenge. It's not that comfort expresses God's love and challenge doesn't. God's challenges are always expressions of his love.

Here in the Eucharist we receive the comfort of God's love but here in the Eucharist we're also challenged to give as Jesus gives, to serve as Jesus serves and to love as Jesus loves. Make no mistake, as beautiful as that might sound, it's a challenge.

In Advent, we seek to live lives of greater conversion and repentance. Like the people going out to John in the desert, we're called to confess our sins and that's why we have the beautiful but challenging Sacrament of Reconciliation. There we not only confess our sins but also confess and hopefully come to realize that God's love is more powerful than our sins. May we prepare the way of the Lord with minds, hearts and lives open to the love of God that is both comforting and challenging.