

COMFORT AND CHALLENGE

The prophet Isaiah speaks of comfort, God comforting his people and, after 70 years, calling them home from exile in Babylon. The prophets called people to justice and, biblically, justice means being faithful in our relationships. The prophets called people to be faithful to their covenant, their sacred commitment and relationship to God and, for them to do this by turning away from sin and idols and by treating people fairly.

Isaiah lived about 700 years before the time of the New Testament. That means that for the people at that time, Isaiah would be about as old as Geoffrey Chaucer would be to us. There was a lot of waiting in all that time but as we are reminded in the second reading, *With the Lord one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like one day*. In other words, God's timing is different from ours.

The gospel takes us to the desert. Deserts are lonely places. Deserts are apart and give you time to think free from many distractions of daily life. Deserts are also places of purification.

In the desert today we find John the Baptist. John was someone different in his wardrobe and his diet. Camel's hair harkens back to the prophet Elijah. John the Baptist is mysterious and even frightening. John's message is more a message of challenge rather than comfort. In it we find words like *repentance* and *acknowledging their sins*.

And yet John's message is similar to that of Isaiah although it's certainly couched in different language. You could say that John's message was one of tough love. His message wasn't, *I'm OK, you're OK*. It was to repent, to turn around. He called people to repent, to turn around, to confess their sins and to prepare the way of the Lord. And yet despite all this, many people went to him accepting his message and embracing what he taught.

Like Isaiah and all the prophets, he called people to be in right relationship and if they were not in right relationship to get into right relationship. Both Isaiah and the

Gospel speak of preparing the way of the Lord. How do we prepare? Well, in many ways.

We prepare the way of the Lord when we turn around, which is to say when we repent; when we turn from that which is bad to that which is good. We do this when we move from lies to truth, from fear to trust, from hatred to love. We prepare the way of the Lord when we acknowledge our sins, when we let go of grudges, when we seek reconciliation and, in a very special way, when we confess our sin in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

We prepare the way of the Lord when we strive to live lives of intentional faith, marked by justice and charity. We prepare the way of the Lord when we accept the comfort and mercy that God wishes to give us as we leave the Babylon of sin and seek to return to the promised land of God's grace. We prepare the way of the Lord when we share in the Mass.

God's mercy is a gift but God's mercy always calls us to greater turning around, greater conversion. May we ask for the grace to prepare the way of the Lord in our own lives and in our world so that we may receive God's gift of freedom and new life.

Prepare the way of the Lord. Preparation is connected to hope. Preparation has its foundation in hope. If there is no hope for something better, there's no need to repent because it doesn't matter. Think of Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. At one point he asks the Ghost of Christmas yet to be, *Are these the shadows of things that will be, or are they the shadows of things that may be?* Of course, the Ghost of Christmas yet to be says nothing but Scrooge rightly concludes that these are the things that may be because if these are the things that will be there would be no need to show them to him. In other words, there is hope. At the base of even the most frightening call to conversion, there is hope.

Isaiah and John the Baptist both called out to prepare the way of the Lord. While Isaiah speaks words of comfort, elsewhere he can be very challenging. John speaks words of challenge, but he and Isaiah, have the same goal: restoration and right relationship, justice, love and mercy. Whether from the Babylonian exile imposed on the people or self-imposed exile of sin, there is a call to prepare the way of the Lord, a call ultimately to freedom and new life.

God's call is one of both challenge and comfort. We need both. Without challenge we easily become complacent, self-satisfied and can start to see God a big, warm fuzzy. Without comfort we easily become discouraged, despairing and may come to see God as a mean policeman. 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 does not. 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 are also challenged to give as Jesus gives, to serve as Jesus serves, and to love as Jesus loves. As beautiful as that might sound, it's a challenge.

It requires faith to accept the challenges of God and it may require more faith to accept the comforts of God. To grow in faith we need both challenge and comfort from God and we need to be open to receiving both. At times we are called to challenge and comfort one another. Through both challenge and comfort we help prepare the way of the Lord.