

Homily for The First Sunday Of Advent (Year C)

In today's gospel Jesus promises liberation for his followers: 'stand erect, hold you heads high, because your liberation is near at hand'. This sense that Jesus comes to set people free is at the heart of our Christian faith. If someone were to ask me 'what is the Church for?' at least part of the answer must be 'setting people free'. Obviously the next question will be 'freedom from what?', and the answer to that is to be found on many levels. Of course, on one level we are about setting people free from material need, free from hunger, from poverty, from dependence, and that is a perfectly right and proper part of the Church's mission, which we carry out in part through our own direct physical assistance, and partly through our support for various charitable works, at home and overseas. But there is more to freedom than that, as is made clear in the second reading where St Paul prays that the Thessalonians may have their hearts 'confirmed in holiness'. When Jesus promises us that our liberation is near at hand, then at least a part of the meaning of this is that he wishes, desires, longs to set us free from all those things which prevent us from being holy.

Holiness is a word that conjours up in us mixed emotions. We know that we ought to want to be holy, but somehow it doesn't sound much fun. It brings to mind images of self-righteousness, people who are disapproving, frowning, lifeless and joyless. Somehow or other we have bought into a stereotype of holiness that is all about rejecting the world, rejecting fun, rejecting almost everything except for suffering. So, when we think of being holy we perhaps feel it is what we ought to aim for, but we'd like to put it off for as long as possible. The first thing that we need to do is to dismantle this image. The basic meaning of holiness is being like God. So, becoming more holy means becoming more like God. If we then think of the Trinity we will think of a God who is full of laughter, and music, and dancing, and joy, and movement and beauty. To be more holy simply means being caught up more and more fully in the life of the Trinity: holiness is certainly not about misery and sadness and disapproval. The holy person will not be recognised by a long face, but by showing forth the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5.22-23).

So, when Jesus promises us liberation, he is promising, amongst other things, to set us free from all those things that stop us from growing in holiness. It would be a very good Advent project to take some time to think about this, to pray about it and to open ourselves up once more to being holy people.

The next stage, I suppose, is to ask ourselves what might be the things from which we need to be set free, the things that stop us from being holy, the things that 'coarsen our hearts' and shut us off from the joy of holiness. Each one of us needs to retreat for a while into the silence of our hearts to be with God, and there to ask him what it is that stops us from growing in holiness. We need to reflect for a while on what holiness really is: being more like God in all his love and joy and peace; we need to take to heart the fact that such a life in fact will be deeply fulfilling, not only for the one that lives it, but also for those around them, and then we need to allow the light of the Holy Spirit to help us see what it is that stands between us and holiness. From what do I need to be set free. For each one of us the answer will be slightly different, but they all derive from one thing, and that is the tendency to self-absorption. Each one of

us is more or less caught up in ourselves. My self-absorption means that everything I see around me is just a reflection of myself, everything and everyone is evaluated in my mind in terms of what impact they have on my life, how they will make it better or worse. Nothing has any value or meaning apart from what difference it makes to my life. Without realising it, I have made myself into a God, because I have put myself at the centre of my life. There is at the heart of every human being an emptiness, a void that is made for God, and if we do not enthrone him firmly in that place, something else always squeezes in: either my own comfort and pleasure becomes my guiding light or else some political or social philosophy, or some 'big idea'. Advent, when we rejoice in God's promise to set us free from all that prevents us from being more holy, is a good time to look honestly at that place within.

So it is our self-absorption that stands between each one of us and a deeper holiness. That manifests itself in so many different ways. For some of us it is an attachment to physical comfort. Unconsciously we have said to ourselves that our own physical comfort is non-negotiable, it is something that we simply will not compromise, and this has crippled us in our search for holiness. There is not, of course, anything wrong with enjoying physical pleasures which are in themselves good - there is nothing wrong with a good meal and a decent bottle of wine at all, until they become something that we cannot manage without. The moment these things become non-negotiable they have become our masters rather than our servants. Our dependence on physical things plants a seed of fear in our hearts, because there is always the niggling possibility that we may lose these comforts, and this fear slowly spreads and grows until the fear of losing our comfort restricts the things that we are able to do. If we are to turn such dependence and such fear into the fruits of the Spirit, we need to be set free.

For some of us our self-absorption is less about physical things and is more interior. Perhaps we need the admiration and the compliments of others, for example. But this, too, is crippling, because inside us there is the fear that such admiration may dry up. Why do they no longer tell me how clever I am? This fear plagues us and distorts our lives: we no longer do things because they are the right thing to do, but we do the things most likely to win us praise. This self-absorption empties our lives of meaning and leaves us profoundly in need of liberation. Others might struggle to admit that we could be wrong, and there is often a tendency for us to believe our own ideas must be the best, simply because they are our ideas. It is hard to admit that someone else knows better. This, too, is crippling, because we cannot ever dare to open our minds to other ideas. We sometimes even close our minds to the wisdom of the Church because we think we know better. So we become tied up in a closed world of our own creating. We need to be set free.

The list goes on and on. For some of us self-absorption is manifest in our dependence on drink, or sex, or seeking danger or power or novelty. We can write the lists for ourselves. Perhaps the Advent is the time for us to open our hearts to Christ the liberator, to call on him to set us free from all the things that stand between us and the joy of holiness. So many of these things seem so alluring to us, but when we stop to look they are empty, hollow and they enslave us. The real joy, and laughter, and hope, and love and peace of mind are to be found by being caught up in the life of God.