

+In Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

The Scriptures appointed for today, the Feast of St. John the Baptist, are starkly and piercingly full of contrasting images. There are no pithy moral teachings as in the Epistles, or poetic picturesque parables with a single point, or wisdom sayings like those in Proverbs or the Psalms. Instead we are offered snapshots of two women whose simple lives are altered and disrupted by God. We see lives that have known drudgery and oppression finally speak of hope and anticipation of real and lasting change. There is the introduction of two cousins whose lives will be intertwined and yet who could hardly be more different in demeanor. And in Isaiah we encounter words of comfort and solace offered to people who have known displacement and exile from all they have held dear simply due to the power held by others. There is no doubt about it; contrast is the tool these lessons use to get our attention and to convey something crucial about our own lives and salvation. This should not come as a great surprise to us because our own existence is marked by what at times seem irreconcilable experiences and events. How many who are parents and have given every opportunity to their children for a good and whole life, have not seen that squandered at times and felt powerless to impact it? As a friend of my commented about her own daughter's struggles, "It is like going to a play... You do not get to write the script of their lives, but you sure as heck have to attend the performance". Or even for ourselves there are those inexplicable events that cut across all our plans for the future, and we find that future is no longer available to us. We know the distance between our hopes and those times which make them seem like a dream.

It is particularly striking today to think of John the Baptist on the one hand and the words of comfort from the prophet Isaiah on the other. Here is a man who explodes on the scene full of fire and brimstone. He calls people snakes—vipers to be exact, tells them they had better get it together or there will be hell to pay, dresses in clothes that even Good Will would not put on the racks for purchase, eats insects and fights the bees for honey, and even later wonders deeply if he has been mistaken about Jesus. Yet even with all his harshness, he provides God's people with a light that illumines where true hope is to be found—in the coming Messiah who will forgive their darkest sins and debts. Like our own lives he is a conundrum. It is the words of his own father that give us the clearest vision of all—"Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel for he has visited and redeemed his people and raised up for us a mighty salvation..." These words are not about John, but the Messiah, who is the Word sent from God.

Words are remarkable and mysterious. They can disclose and open up or hid and deceive. They have the power to comfort and heal and relieve, and also the capacity to harm and exclude. They can induce guilt, bind and exile and they can set us free from the enemies of sin, hatred, and oppression. It depends on 'Who' speaks them!! Think about the words we cling to and remember; words that bring us hope and well-being from people who love us. These are not simply consonants and vowels like newsprint. They are living reminders that alter how we see the world and our place in it. And know this; the Word from God is never merely one chain of chatter after another. It is the living presence that gives life to the world.

Isaiah's message of hope, while a gentler one, is also a matter of contrast. To a people in exile he says, "the flowers fade and the grass withers, but the word of our God will endure forever". In one phrase he acknowledges both the dilemma and the hope in being human.

The first part of that verse is the challenge. Life as we know it is partial. It often falls short of our wishes. We, too, find ourselves doing those things that at some level we know are not in our best interest or in the interest of others, and at the same time do not do what we also know we should. Our strength and resolve fade. We succumb to the belief we are not able to be more than we now are. Like Israel we

experience exile. What life is like in 2018 will come to an end. Great deeds and events will be forgotten, and even things that gave us excitement and pleasure have already lost some luster. Life has a quality of decay—not because it is evil, but because held against the light of God's eternal love it will always be partial. It is that which is lacking for us that drives us all the more to what is lasting. Zechariah knew it and thus he could sing these words even in a world that was not yet what he longed after.

Isaiah's answer, which is echoed throughout Scripture and history, is that the word of our God will remain forever. Surely the people must have thought how can mere words impact and change the losses we have faced? What word is that? Where is it spoken so decisively that we may be encountered by it? It is not merely a word that has been spoken, but that has been done. It has happened in a covenant in which God has chosen us and does not leave us out in the cold. It is in an action whereby He is telling us something we cannot fully understand, namely, that He has loved us all, will love us tomorrow, and the day after that for as long as we live, and even after we live no longer with the same love whether we are good or bad, wise or foolish, well off or unfortunate. God has given us his Word simply by doing what He says. What has happened, and what St. John points to, is that God has become human like us, become our brother, taken on himself all that we are in order to make our bad, our evil condition His own. In doing so He carries off the burden of our sin, the struggle of the perversity and error that weigh us down in order that it no longer oppresses us. Few, if any, human words can do that!!

And there is one thing more. That Word will endure forever. This is because the One who does it remains. It means that it can never become old or outdated. That word to which John the Baptist pointed when he spoke of Christ, and to which Zechariah sung is always fresh and new. It may be spoken of differently for every succeeding generation, and have to be interpreted as new situations arise, but it is always and everywhere present. It will remain behind the stumbles and failures we perform, behind the successes and tragedies of human life even beyond history as we know it. And that presence of God is what halts the power of decay we so often feel pressing in on us. Amen+