

## GOSPEL

*John 1:6-8, 19-28*

A man came, sent by God. His name was John. He came as a witness, as a witness to speak for the light, so that everyone might believe through him. He was not the light, only a witness to speak for the light.

This is how John appeared as a witness. When the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, ‘Who are you?’ he not only declared, but he declared quite openly, ‘I am not the Christ.’ ‘Well then,’ they asked, ‘are you Elijah?’ ‘I am not,’ he said. ‘Are you the Prophet?’ He answered, ‘No.’ So they said to him, ‘Who are you? We must take back an answer to those who sent us. What have you to say about yourself?’ So John said, ‘I am, as Isaiah prophesied: a voice that cries in the wilderness: Make a straight way for the Lord.’

Now these men had been sent by the Pharisees, and they put this further question to him, ‘Why are you baptising if you are not the Christ, and not Elijah, and not the prophet?’ John replied, ‘I baptise with water; but there stands among you – unknown to you – the one who is coming after me; and I am not fit to undo his sandal-strap.’ This happened at Bethany, on the far side of the Jordan, where John was baptising.

## HOMILY OF POPE ST JOHN PAUL II

*15 December 1996 (Excerpt)*

“Gaudete in Domino semper. Iterum dico: Gaudete! ... Dominus prope”. “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.... The Lord is at hand” (Phil 4:4-5). It is from these words taken from St Paul’s letter to the Philippians, that this Sunday takes the liturgical name “Gaudete”. Today the liturgy urges us to rejoice because the birth of the Lord is approaching: in fact it is only 10 days away.

In his Letter to the Thessalonians, the Apostle exhorts us thus: “Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances.... May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thes 5:16-18;23).

This is a typical Advent exhortation. Advent is the liturgical season that prepares us for the Lord’s birth, but it is also the time of expectation for the definitive return of Christ for the last judgement, and St Paul refers, in the first place, to this second coming. The very fact that the conclusion of the liturgical year coincides with the beginning of Advent suggests that “the beginning of the time of salvation” is in some way linked to the “end of time”. This exhortation typical of Advent always applies: “The Lord is at hand!”

John the Baptist is one of the most significant biblical figures we meet during this important season of the liturgical year. In the fourth Gospel we read: “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light” (Jn 1:6-8). To the question “Who are you?”, John the Baptist responds: “I am not the Christ”, nor Elijah, nor any other of the prophets (cf. Jn 1:19-20). And faced with the insistence of those sent from Jerusalem, he says: “I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord’” (Jn 1:23).

With this quote from Isaiah, in a certain sense he reveals his identity and clarifies his special role in the history of salvation. And when the representatives of the Sanhedrin ask him why he is baptizing, although he is neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor any other prophet, he answers: “I baptize with water; but among you stands one whom you do not know, even he who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie” (Jn 1:26-27).

John the Baptist’s witness re-echoes in the Advent verse: “The Lord is at hand!”. The different perspectives of the night of Bethlehem and the baptism in the Jordan converge in the same truth: we must shake off our inertia and prepare the way of the Lord who comes.

The prophet’s joyful proclamation is echoed in what St Paul writes in the passage from his Letter to the Thessalonians we have just heard. Isaiah affirms: “I rejoice heartily in the Lord” (Is 61:10), and Paul exhorts: “Rejoice! The Lord is at hand!” (cf. Phil 4:4-5; 1 Thes 5:16, 23).

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The Lord Jesus is at hand at every moment of our life. He is at hand if we consider him in the perspective of Christmas, but he is also at hand if we look at him on the banks of the Jordan when he officially receives his messianic mission from the Father; lastly, he is at hand in the perspective of his return at the end of time.

Christ is at hand! He comes by virtue of the Holy Spirit to announce the Good News; he comes to cure and to set free, to proclaim a time of grace and salvation, in order to begin, already on the night of Bethlehem, the work of the world's redemption.

Let us therefore rejoice and exult! The Lord is at hand; he is coming to save us. Amen!

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What stood out to you from the Gospel or Reflection/ Homily?



**Head:** What do we understand by Jesus' work of 'saving us' and 'setting us free'?



**Heart:** How have you already experienced Jesus' saving work in your own life?



**Hands:** In what ways can we share the joyful message that 'the Lord is at hand; he is coming to save us'?

## PRAYER

Spend some time in prayer with one another:

1. Conscious of what has just been shared, members briefly name/ describe their prayer needs.
2. Intentionally call on the Holy Spirit to be present (for example, "Come Holy Spirit, please be present as we pray")
3. Offer prayers of thanks and praise to God.
4. Pray for each others' prayer needs. Where appropriate, you may like to encourage the group to place a hand on the shoulder of the individual that you are currently praying for.
5. Conclude your prayer time with another prayer of praise, perhaps praying the 'Glory Be'.