



14. December 2021

The holy remnant

Zeph 3:1-2.9-13

*Disaster to the rebellious, the befouled, the tyrannical city! She has not listened to the call, she has not bowed to correction, she has not trusted in Yahweh, she has not drawn near to her God. Yes, then I shall purge the lips of the peoples, so that all may invoke the name of Yahweh and serve him shoulder to shoulder. From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia, my suppliants will bring me tribute. When that Day comes you will never again be ashamed of all the deeds with which you once rebelled against me, for I shall rid you of those who exult in your pride; never again will you strut on my holy mountain. But in you I shall leave surviving a humble and lowly people, and those who are left in Israel will take refuge in the name of Yahweh. They will do no wrong, will tell no lies; nor will a deceitful tongue be found in their mouths. But they will be able to graze and rest with no one to alarm them.*

I would like to add a few more verses to the text of this reading, which describe in more detail what the misery of the people consists of, and which allow us to make a connection with the Gospel of the day. Indeed, the more the misery is seen, the more the goodness of the Lord shines forth, who wants to put an end to it. Let us listen, then, to verses 3 to 5 of the same chapter of Zephaniah: *"The rulers she has are roaring lions, her judges are wolves of the wastelands which leave nothing over for the morning, her prophets are braggarts, impostors, her priests have profaned what is holy and violated the Law. Yahweh the Upright is in her, he does no wrong; morning by morning he gives judgement, each dawn unfailingly but the wrong-doer knows no shame."*

The Lord does not hide from us the iniquity of those who are called to lead the People. It is painful and tragic when precisely the leaders of the People go astray and fall into wickedness. People need good shepherds to lead them in safe paths. When they do not have them, they easily scatter and fall prey to the wolves.

The Lord counters this wretched state of confusion and wickedness - which reaches to the highest strata of the people - with his unwavering desire to save. He re-establishes justice, uproots the haughty and boastful, and seeks out a humble and poor people: this is the holy remnant.

The Lord always offers every person the possibility of conversion. But are they willing to listen to Him, and do the powerful and the authorities of all kinds perceive His call?

Today's gospel gives us an insight into a situation that at first may seem puzzling. Jesus says to the chief priests and the elders of the people: *"In truth I tell you, tax collectors and prostitutes are making their way into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you, showing the*

*way of uprightness, but you did not believe him, and yet the tax collectors and prostitutes did. Even after seeing that, you refused to think better of it and believe in him." (Mt 21:31b-32)*

Not infrequently it is precisely the sinners who accept the Word; while the first called ones are left behind. The Lord brings forth His holy remnant from those who truly follow Him. It is God's business to gather His own. Some start well, but then lose their way; others arrive only at the last minute; still others remain faithful from the beginning; others become unfaithful, but then, with God's grace, return to the way. All this is in God's hands!

In any case, those who remain with the Lord in all tribulations are part of the holy remnant. Such find peace in Him; no false word is found in them; the Lord leads them to His pastures.

What the biblical texts tell us today concerning the people of Israel certainly applies to us Christians as well. We must perceive that God is purifying His Church, both the pastors (who have an even greater responsibility), but also each of the faithful, who bear the Name of the Lord. For the witness of the Church to shine again brightly in this world, a true conversion is needed right now.

The Gospel is not compatible with the spirit of the world. Whoever allows himself to be influenced by the spirit of the world will quickly adopt its mentality and behaviour. The more this happens in our Church, the more she moves away from the Spirit of the Lord.

But why is it that it is often the simple people, or even "publicans and prostitutes", who receive the message of the Gospel, and not the first guests? Perhaps the heart of the problem is related to pride. The Gospel, in its essence, is a very simple and humble message. Even if the most erudite scholars study it and it has given rise to so many reflections; even if countless books have been written about the Gospel, its message remains simple. Perhaps man does not like to owe himself in the first instance to the grace of God. Perhaps he wants to be great for his own sake, as Lucifer was. Perhaps he measures his worth by what other people think of him or by how he would like to be seen by them. Perhaps he lacks the courage and humility to recognise his limitations as a creature and can not simply throw himself into the loving arms of God.

This is where the message of Advent comes to help us. Especially in this Season, we hope and think of the One who is truly great in Himself, and who, nevertheless, wanted to come to us as a Child. The infinite God chooses a human Mother, to be close to us and to redeem us. She whom He chooses places herself at His service in all humility (cf. Lk 1:38). The whole atmosphere of the Birth of the Son of God breathes simplicity and austerity. And then we see the Child, who draws our hearts to Himself.

The message is simple! Out of love, God comes to us, to redeem us and lead us to His eternal Kingdom. It is that simple and that true!