

HOMILY SUNDAY ADVENT 3-A (Homily 02)

“Be Least in the Kingdom”

(Isaiah 35:1-6, 10; Psalm 146; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11)

Fr. Bill Stang OMI started a shrub and flower garden in the back yard of the archdiocesan residence in The Pas last year. This spring, he placed railway ties along the fence and filled the space behind them with topsoil. In the process, he noticed a plant sprouting up in the compost bin. Thinking it might be a zucchini plant, he lifted it out and planted it in the freshly laid topsoil. The growing conditions must have been ideal, because that plant grew to be at least twenty feet long and produced, not zucchini, but three huge pumpkins. That small seed, thrown into the compost, frozen all winter and rescued in the spring, was transformed into a magnificent pumpkin plant that produced beautiful fruit. This seems like such a minor everyday reality, but when we take time to ponder it, the word “awesome” comes to mind.

Fr. Bill’s pumpkin plant can be a symbol of this season of Advent. This Sunday is known in the Church as Gaudate Sunday, or Sunday of joy. We are reminded that Advent is meant to be a healing journey of joyful expectation, leading to a deeper experience of the Kingdom of God. We are invited to be even the least in that Kingdom, and greater than John the Baptist.

The first reading is a marvellous description of transformation, of new life blossoming in the desert, much like Fr. Bill’s pumpkin plant rescued from the compost heap. It speaks of healing and wholeness and newness, the stuff that Advent is made of.

In the Gospel we are told that Jesus is the Messiah, the one who was to come. That was proven by his miracles. The greatness of John the Baptist is his closeness to Christ. All the Old Testament prophecies have been fulfilled in Christ, for whom John prepared the way. Jesus points out that what his coming is all about is to inaugurate the Kingdom of God among us, and that the least in the kingdom is greater than John the Baptist.

There will always be some struggle and challenge as we seek to follow the advice of John and put our faith in Jesus. John the Baptist’s own dilemma about the identity of Jesus is an indication of that touch of mystery that will be a daily companion for the disciples. The Jesus that John encountered clashed with his expectations and left him wondering – was this man really the Messiah, the one

who was to come, or should they look for another. His reply to John confirms that Jesus is the fulfilment of prophecy, but that his kingdom is not of this world. The focus of the kingdom of Jesus is on personal transformation and communal empowerment, not politics and economics, as important as that is.

The Kingdom of Jesus had truly come into this world as God's tender love for the poor and the marginalized, in a totally non-violent fashion that would end up as a sacrificial victim on the cross. That cross would prove, however, to be the very source of resurrection and new life, the key to the kingdom.

In the second reading we are reminded of the mysterious nature of this kingdom that will grow not in spectacular fashion, but by love shown as patience and perhaps even long suffering. We are never to lose hope, however, for that suffering will be vindicated and transformed. We cannot lose when it comes to following Jesus. All that seems negative and dark will be turned to the good for those who believe and who love Jesus.

We are to be like a farmer during drought who knows the power of rain. The people of Kenya, where the Oblates are presently serving, know what it means to wait patiently for the rainy season that will transform the parched land into verdant green growth. Ours must be humble faith and long-suffering patience, like the prophets and like the people of Kenya.

We need to be aware of our blindness, lameness, imprisonment, muteness as we journey with Jesus through the vicissitudes of our own lives. Faith in Jesus as Messiah does not mean a quick fix (many seek an easy, softer way), but an inner healing journey of joyful expectation. We must allow the Christ who has come, and the Christ who is present here and now, to transform us as we await the Christ who will come again.

Celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation during Advent is a great faith-filled way to deal with our darkness. Working the Steps of the 12 Step program for those in the program is another great way to journey through Advent towards a more meaningful celebration of Christmas, God among us.

Lionel is a man who has struggled with addictions and self-esteem for years. He has finally grown to where he can put his complete trust and confidence in the Messiah, has experienced forgiveness and healing through the 12 Step program OF Alcoholics Anonymous, and is now giving workshops on faith and self esteem with his wife. His home life with his family has also been transformed as they pray

together and share their lives together as a family in ways not possible before. He is truly experiencing the Kingdom of God in his family and in his life with joyful gratitude.

The Eucharist that we now celebrate is a participation in the joyful expectation of Advent. The One who came, and who is to come again, comes to us now through Word and Sacrament. Happy are we who are called to his supper.

So, let us strive to be the least in the Kingdom, by lives of faithful, joyful expectation, knowing that we will be greater than even John the Baptist.