

Readings:

First Reading: *Baruch 5*

Benedictus (Luke 1:68–79)

Second Reading: *Philippians 1:3-11*

Gospel Reading: *Luke 3:1-6*

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In May some of us hope to join a pilgrimage to Assisi in Italy. As an Italian I therefore begin with a bit of geography on Italy. To get to Assisi from Vienna by bus you have to pass the famous artistic city of Florence. And in order to reach Florence, you have to cross the Apennine mountains between Bologna and Florence. And here is the interesting part for us today: just after passing Bologna, if you are on the motorway, you are given a choice of two roads: a direct one on one side, and a scenic one on the other side. You cannot really miss the fork in the road because there are two huge road signs. Beware! If you are travelling on your own the signs are only in Italian. One option is to take the recently opened “direttissima” (2015), which unsurprisingly means “the direct one”. The other option is to take the “panoramica” – the scenic road.

What does this mean in practice if you are travelling? If you take the direct option you reach Florence in about 60 minutes travelling mostly through a tunnel and without driving uphill and downhill all the time. It is pretty much a straight road very easy and comfortable. If you take the scenic road instead it takes you ninety minutes to reach Florence, an extra 30 minutes, and you must be careful because of the many bends and you will have to drive uphill and downhill, up and down again, all the time, with the added risk of snow in the winter and accidents because of the narrow stretches. Who takes the scenic road nowadays? Very, very few people – even though it says “panoramica”, that is “scenic”, on the road sign. It is a dangerous road which neither passengers nor drivers much enjoy, I believe. I trust the Florence tourist bureau will forgive me this remark?

Today’s readings contained some geography both in the reading from the Prophet Isaiah as well as the Gospel with the mention of valleys and hills, mountains and paths. These made me think about the Italian roads between Bologna and Florence. Other examples from daily life convey a similar idea. Are you familiar with this example from everyday life? Having set the satnav to reach a destination you don’t know, it gradually dawns on you as you are driving that it is taking much longer than it should, as you are directed down backroads and up hilly

roads while all the time failing to connect with the main straight road. A similar experience can be made using trains and buses. Who hasn't taken the "wrong" bus or train. The train or bus stopping at each and every station and bound for a destination which is much faster to reach on another bus or train?

Returning to today's readings we hear John the Baptist reference the prophet Isaiah saying

*Prepare the way of the Lord,
Make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the rough ways shall be made smooth.* Luke 3:5

When Jesus later in the same Gospel, namely that of Luke (7.27), speaks about John's preaching, he emphasises that what John had to do was to make straight the paths of the Lord.

Today's Advent readings issue a clear invitation to begin now to prepare ourselves for his coming at Christmas and for his coming at the last to judge the living and the dead. Our preparation will include making smooth, making straight. Of the two roads in Italy God, so to say, would want us to take the direct one, the straight one, the fast and easy. Because this is the road that, metaphorically speaking, brings us to him without delay and allows God to reach out to us without delay as he longs to be with us and love us with a perfect love. There is no time, no opportunity or occasion to lose for us to be close to God. God is looking for us, and invites us to make our inner paths, our inner motorways, our rail tracks straight, to meet him without obstacles.

The question then is: what are the inner valleys to be filled and mountains to be made low? What does it mean to prepare for the coming of the Lord? Where is this straight path? The clue is given by going back to the Gospel through the idea of a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins". Let us take a moment to reflect on what this means for us.

The idea behind baptism, derived from the Greek word *baptismos*, is that of immersion - normally immersion in water. And the word "repentance" has a more nuanced meaning than what we normally give it. When we hear the word "repent" we think about the meaning of "confessions of sins", of "doing penitence". And certainly there is an element of that in the word repentance. But the word is much richer in the original Greek than it is in English. The

word *metanoia*, that is “repentance”, also means to “change mental path”, to “think differently” or, in a way, “to change life”.

The word “repent” invites us to check our own overall life, our priorities, how we look at ourselves, others, nature, work, money, our commitments and more, and whether any of these has taken the place of God. The word “repentance” invites us to see what in us needs to be better aligned with God's plan for us. Repentance is an occasion to get rid of all that is not helpful for life, all the mountains of negative thoughts, of anger and bitterness, and the pitfalls, or valleys, of discouragement, or the winding paths of lack of love for others and for what we do daily. This all does certainly not separate us from God, but makes it hard for us to hear God’s voice and feel his love.

I recently came across a list of the five most common regrets of the dying. Let me briefly mention them:

1. I wish I had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.
2. I wish I hadn't worked so hard.
3. I wish I had the courage to express my feelings.
4. I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends.
5. I wish that I had let myself be happier.

Maybe we don't think about life in this way, but the way of repentance invites us, even challenges us to reflect on our values and where we are headed, as an individual, as a family or as a community. Embarking on the way of repentance allows God to transform our life, without delay, with his values, and to live the life he would have us live. This is a meaning of “baptism of repentance”: we can be immersed in God, through his Word, and Sacrament, and prayer, and so we are able to repent, we are able to change the course of our life.

Practically speaking, Advent is a perfect time for starting on a journey of repentance, which can simply mean to pray and worship with the community as today, and/or to make time as little as 5 minutes a day to sit still before God, or to pray while walking or after waking up in the morning.

And then comes the reality of forgiveness as in “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”. Through our immersion in God, when we reflect on and change our values to be his values, and our world and mind to be God’s world and mind, we are able to start anew, we are able to be forgiven and to forgive. We are forgiven our sins and all that prevents us from

living a full life in God. We are able to start a new journey, without regrets, to be renewed and so to fill the valleys, and so make the paths straight and the mountains low, so that the Lord can come and be with us at any moment without delay. Come Lord, and renew our lives and be with us always, this and every day. **Amen.**