

The Second Sunday of Advent December 5, 2021

Early in October this year, Pope Francis announced that he would declare Saint Irenaeus of Lyons to be a “Doctor of the Church.” When the Church uses “doctor” to describe a saint it is not in the sense of a medical doctor but in the sense of “teacher” like a “Doctor of Philosophy” or a “Doctor of English”. By declaring Saint Irenaeus of Lyons a “Doctor of the Church”, Pope Francis is telling us that this saint has something important to teach us about what we believe as Christians and that we should pay close attention to what this saint preached about during his lifetime.

Saint Irenaeus was a bishop who lived in the south of France just over 1800 years ago. During that time, he worked to spread the Catholic faith and to fight against wrong ideas that people had about the teaching of Jesus.

One of the great quotes from his writing is: “The glory of God is man fully alive and the life of man consists in beholding God.” This quote reminds us of something Jesus said, “I have come that they may have life and have it to the full” (John 10:10). Sometimes we can get so caught up in the rules and regulations of religion that we miss why Jesus came to earth in the first place. He came so that we could be fully alive. As Saint Irenaeus says, God shows his glory by making us come alive. God’s desire for us is to be the person He created us to be - someone who is full of joy and full of love. That is one of the beautiful truths that makes Saint Irenaeus’s teaching so important for us to know and understand.

When we realize that God wants us to be fully alive and radiant with His love, then we can understand what sin is. Sin keeps us from living fully the life that God intended for us. It keeps us from fully being the people that God created us to be. Sin tarnishes our beauty, it makes us shine less brightly, and it drains our strength. Sin is like a disease that keeps us weak and unable to enjoy life. That is why God speaks so forcefully about our need to avoid sin. And that is why Jesus went so far as to die on the cross for us - so that we could be healed of the disease of sin and live fully the life that God intends for us - a life that shows forth His glory.

All of today’s readings speak about this glory that God wants to give His People. In today’s first reading, God speaks through the prophet Baruch to His People during a time when their country had been devastated by war and their citizens taken away into exile. The prophet says that they have been wearing a “robe of mourning and misery”, clothing that poor people and those who are going to a funeral might wear. But God is telling them to throw off that clothing and instead to dress like royalty “wrapped in the cloak of justice from God” and wearing on our heads “the mitre that displays the glory of the eternal name.” God is assuring His people that, though they have suffered greatly, He will bring them back to a place of joy.

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Though these words were written many thousands of years ago, they still speak to us today. We have been through some difficult years dealing with the pandemic, with economic uncertainty, and with political divisions. And as a Church we've experienced scandal and people abandoning their faith. Things look bleak for us, and it is easy to lose hope. But God is calling us to look past our fears and anxieties and to look to Him. All things are possible with God. If He is leading us through pain and suffering, it is so that we can reach a place of happiness and peace. If He has brought us low, it is so that He can raise us up again. He is calling us to have confidence in His promise that He will make all things work for our good. And we can be assured that what He has planned for us is greater than we could ever hope for or imagine.

Saint Paul speaks about this hope we should have in today's second reading when he says, "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus." God is doing a "good work" in us. It began at our baptism when we received the Holy Spirit and it has continued every moment since. We experience it when we find the strength to resist a temptation. We experience it when we are inspired to help someone in need. God is at work in us whenever we spend time in prayer. It is not the result of our good intentions or our willpower. Rather, it is God speaking to our hearts and moving our wills to draw us closer and closer to Himself.

Saint Paul goes on to tell us what that "good work" looks like. It is a love that increases. It is knowledge that helps us to choose what is good for us over what is bad for us. It makes us "pure and blameless". It fills us with "the fruit of righteousness". Just as a tree is fully alive when it is bearing fruit, so we are fully alive when we are beaming with the goodness of God. And all this is for the "glory and praise of God." God works to make us fully alive so that His glory can be shown through us. We can have confidence that He will not give up on us but will continue to work until we are fully the people He created us to be.

Finally, today's gospel introduces us to the figure of Saint John the Baptist. He is the great voice of this Advent season, calling us to turn away from all those actions and attitudes which keep us from living fully the life God intends for us. He tells us that God wants to clear away the obstacles that keep us separated from Him. He has the power to fill in valleys of despair and tear down mountains of arrogance. He has the power to clear a highway through the thick forests of indifference and selfishness. God will do anything and everything to reach us. We only have to look at the cross to know how true that is. This Advent Season is a time for us to become more aware of God's presence in our lives and His desire for intimate friendship with us.

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God shows His glory to the world by making His People come alive with love and joy. That is what He wants for us. Like a child who is running to us, He asks simply that we open our arms and welcome Him. These weeks of Advent are a time for us to prepare our hearts to embrace God, who comes to us as a child in Jesus so that we can receive all the gifts He wants to give us and to live the life He intends for us.