

Homily for Advent 2:

December 6th 2020*Active Waiting*

Father Henri Nouwen was a priest whose ministry included teaching at Yale and Harvard. Later in life he left the Ivy League World to enter into the L'arche Community in Toronto at "Day Break House". Here he lived and ministered among the severely disabled and wrote extensively about what it means to live among those whom Pope St. John Paul II described as living icons of the crucified Son.¹

In one reflection, timely for this Advent Season, Fr Nouwen wrote:

Most of us consider waiting as something very passive, a hopeless state determined by events totally out of our hands. The bus is late. We cannot do anything about it, so we have to sit there and just wait. It is not difficult to understand the irritation people feel when somebody says, "Just wait." Words like that push us into passivity. But there is none of this passivity in Scripture. Those who are waiting are waiting very actively. Scripture shows us that to wait is to wait with openness and trust. This is an enormously radical attitude toward life. It is choosing to hope that something is happening for us that is far beyond our own imaginings. It is giving up control over our future and letting God define our life. It is living with the conviction that God molds us in love, holds us in tenderness, and moves us away from the sources of our fear.²

These words resonate with our Scripture texts appointed for this second Sunday of Advent. Our reading from Isaiah is filled with the language of people who are waiting. Set during the time when the People of God had been in exile hundreds of kilometres from their beloved, Jerusalem, it speaks with poetic eloquence about how God molds us in love.

Listen to these words:

"Comfort my people, O comfort my people, speak tenderly to Jerusalem".

God knows how so many of us have experienced in life relationships that make it so difficult for us to trust. This leaves us with an interior feeling of hopelessness because we have not experienced what it means to be molded in love. Beloved, what Jesus wants to do in our lives, is instill within us a way to cultivate the capacity to listen with greater attentiveness to the voice of the one who doesn't want to shame us but rather wants to claim us as his own. In the wilderness of our lives – in the desert place where the barren landscape can often result in a kind of desolation - in this place Jesus wants us to hear resonating deep in our hearts a word where we discover his tender care.

Notice in Isaiah twice the phrase, O "Zion", or "Jerusalem" herald of good tidings". What is this about? Good tidings are the words of hope-filled waiting. The looking forward to the day when

¹ http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2004/january/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20040108_handicap-mentale.html

² <https://henrinouwen.org/meditation/active-waiting-2/>

God will come who will feed his flock like a shepherd and gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.”

Part of what we are all waiting for is the deepening encounter with Jesus who wants to mold us in love, as we learn to hear and respond to the voice of the one who most loves us.

When we discover this - we in turn more deeply realize how Jesus holds us in tenderness. In the Gospel John the Baptist is the one who fulfills the prophecy from Isaiah. For the Jewish people understood that when the Lord came – in fulfillment of Isaiah 40 - there would be a New Exodus. Just as the Lord led the Jewish people through the Desert making the way straight for them to arrive at the Promised Land; so too John the Baptist goes out into the dessert where he does something remarkable. He baptizes people in the Jordan River. What is remarkable about this is the symbolism. The first Exodus ended when the people cross over the Jordan and entered the Promised Land at Jericho. The New Exodus starts where the old Exodus ended. John was declaring through this action that the one coming after him, would be the focal point of the New Exodus. For it would be in and through Jesus that the Holy Spirit would bestow his graces upon us so as to liberate us from the bondage of sin. This is so we can discover how in the Third Person of the Trinity we are enabled to enter into a life defined not primarily by our past, “repentance for the forgiveness of sins”, but with patient hope that is ours because we are confident about the present and the future. We trust Jesus is at work in our lives through the Sacraments of the Church, whereby he looks upon us with tender love. As we truly confess our sins, we no longer have to define our life by those things; rather we are learning see how the fruit of the Holy Spirit as enumerated by St. Paul in Galatians 5 characterizes us:

love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control.³

As we allow for the Lord to mold us in love and hold us in tenderness we discover how these nine-fold qualities of life in the Spirit are increasingly manifested in our lives. At the same time we are able to honestly admit ways in which they are not as evident as we want them to be. Therefore to be an Advent people is to live actively waiting for the further flourishing of Spirit-infused life.

When this happens we are able to move away from the source of our fear which results from thinking we are alone in the world. We can cultivate the perspective of St. Peter so as to live loosely in the present. This is because we are so confident that in the fullness of God’s purposes there will be a new heaven and new earth where righteousness is at home. In other words we have the confidence that in the end everything that Isaiah poetically expresses will bring us to discover how patient God has been with us as he works for the complete renewal and restoration of the Universe. But this is something that takes time because with the “Lord a day is like and thousand years, and a thousand years is like a day” (2 Peter 3.8).

³ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Ga 5:22–23). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

I find it an inspiration that Fr Nouwen moved away from the world of high academia where he lived among those who are powerful and in control of this world, into a world where patient waiting would have characterized his daily life as he lived among these icons of the Cross. To again quote Pope St John Paul II:

It is said, justifiably so, that disabled people are humanity's privileged witnesses. They can teach everyone about the love that saves us; they can become heralds of a new world, no longer dominated by force, violence and aggression, but by love, solidarity and acceptance, a new world transfigured by the light of Christ, the Son of God who became incarnate, who was crucified and rose for us.⁴

It is for this world that we all hopefully and actively wait and indeed already participate in when we live with the conviction that God molds us in love, holds us in tenderness, and moves us away from the sources of our fear.

⁴ http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2004/january/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20040108_handicap-mentale.html