

ADVENT REFLECTIONS - WEEK FOUR

GOSPEL: Luke 3:1-6

Now, in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pilate being Governor of Judea, and Herod Tetrarch of Galilee, and Philip his brother Tetrarch of Iturea and the country of Trachonitis, and Lysanias Tetrarch of Abilina, under the high priests Annas and Caiphas, the word of the Lord was made unto John, the son of Zachary, in the desert. And he came into all the country about the Jordan, preaching the baptism of penance for the remission of sins, as it was written in the book of the sayings of Isaias the prophet: 'A voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare ye the way of the Lord; make straight His paths. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways plain. And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'

HOMILY BY POPE SAINT GREGORY THE GREAT:

1. The Gospel, speaking of the Roman Emperor Tiberius and of the different Princes governing Judea and Galilee and other provinces, has no other motive but to tell us the year in which *the word of the Lord was made unto John*, the Precursor of the true Messiah. He was to announce to the world Him Who would save some among the Jews and a great number of Gentiles; therefore the time of his ministry is given by the name of the Emperor who reigned over the Gentiles and by the Princes governing in Judea. The enrollment which had taken place in the world, indicated that the Gentiles were to be united, whilst the faithless nation of the Jews would be dispersed. For the Romans recognized but one supreme chief, while Judea was divided into four provinces under as many Princes. Thus was verified among the Jews the word of the Redeemer: *Every kingdom divided against itself shall be brought to desolation* (Luke 11:17). And the names of the high priests are given after those of the Kings, because John the Baptist announced the Messiah, who was both Priest and King. St. Luke, mentioning in his Gospel the ministry of the Precursor, speaks at the same time of the office of priests and rulers.
2. *John came into all the country about the Jordan, preaching the baptism of penance for the remission of sins.* From the words of Holy Scripture it appears that St. John not only preached the baptism of penance, but also administered it to some of the Jews. His baptism could not forgive sins, for only the baptism instituted by Jesus can do that. However, he preached the baptism of penance; or, though he had not the power to give the baptism which sanctifies, at least he announced it to the world. This great prophet had preached, in the ministry of the Word, the Saviour Who, being the uncreated Word of the Father, was made man for us; and now he represented by his sterile baptism the Sacrament of the real Baptism, which alone can sanctify, truth and reality being preceded by shadows and symbols.
3. And the Gospel adds: *As it was written in the book of the sayings of Isaias the prophet: A voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare ye the way of the Lord; make straight His paths.* When John was asked by the priests and Levites: *Who art thou?* He answered: *I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness* (John 1:23). He was called by the prophet a voice,

as we have shown elsewhere, because by his voice he had preceded the Divine Word. We also know the words uttered by this voice, for the prophet himself tells them, saying: *Prepare ye the way of the Lord; make straight His paths*. We learn from all this that he, who preached the true faith and the necessity of good works, wished also to prepare the hearts of those who listened to him, that is, to prepare the way by which the Lord was coming. For he removed from men's hearts whatever could prevent the grace of God from entering into and illuminating them by the Divine light. The minister of the word makes the ways straight for the steps of the Redeemer, when he awakens pious thoughts in the mind of his hearers. Therefore, when it is said: *Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low*, we understand the the humble are meant by the valleys and the proud by the mountains. We know now why at the coming of the Saviour of the world the valleys were to be filled and the mountains to be brought low, for He Himself said: *Everyone that exalteth himself, shall be humbled; and he that humbleth himself, shall be exalted* (Luke 14:11). A valley, which is filled up, rises and increases; whilst a mountain or hill brought down will decrease. Thus we see that the Gentiles, who in all humility received the faith in Jesus Christ, the Mediator between God and man, received the fulness of grace; whilst the Jews, puffed up and filled with pride and vanity, lost the grace of God through their faithlessness. The valleys are filled, because the humble, receiving into their hearts the word of salvation, obtain at the same time grace to help them to practice virtue, according to the words of the psalmist: *Thou sendest forth springs in the vales* (Ps. 103:10); and again: *The vales shall abound with corn* (Ps. 64:14). The water running down the mountains represents those proud men who have forsaken the doctrine of truth; but humble souls receive the truth preached to them, like the valleys receive the waters which render them fertile. Indeed, we recognize this fact when we consider those whose meekness and simplicity are despised by the world, but who are nourished and filled with the bread of Divine truth.

4. When the multitude saw the extraordinary holiness of John the Baptist, they believed him to be the firm and high mountain announced in Holy Scripture: *It shall come to pass that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be prepared in the top of mountains, and high above the hills; and the people shall flow to it* (Mich. 4:1). These words were applied to St. John the more confidently since, according to the Gospel, he was taken for Christ Himself: *The people were of opinion, and all were thinking in their hearts of John, that perhaps he might be the Christ* (Luke 3:15). The multitude, thinking this in their hearts, insisted on an answer, and said to him: *Art thou not Christ?* But John the Baptist, through his own humility, was in his own eyes like a deep valley. He was, therefore, filled with the grace of the Holy Ghost, and, making known the opinion he had of himself, he answered: *He that shall come after me is preferred before me, the latchet of whose shoe I am not worthy to loose*. Again he said: *He that hath the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who standers and heareth him, rejoiceth with joy because of the bridegroom voice. This my joy therefore is fulfilled. He must increase, by I must decrease* (John 3:29-30). We see, therefore, that John the Baptist, on account of his great virtues, was taken for Jesus Christ by those who saw and heard him. In order to bring them out of this error, he answered that he was not only not Christ, but that he was not even worthy to loose the latchet of His shoe, that is, to investigate and understand the great mystery of the Incarnation. They also imagined, when taking John

for Jesus Christ, that the Church was His Bride. However, he formally declared that the true bridegroom was He who possessed the bride, as if to say: I am not the bridegroom, only the friend of the Bridegroom, giving us to understand that his only joy consisted in hearing the Bridegroom's voice, and that he did not glory in his own voice. For the joy which St. John felt in his heart did not come from the fact that the multitude listened to him in sincere humility, but from the hope that the voice of truth had gained their hearts, and that by his teaching he would then unfold the truth more fully to them. He could, therefore, say that his joy was full; for he that rejoices only because his voice was listened to, cannot possess real and entire happiness.

5. St. John, speaking of our Redeemer, added: *He must increase, but I must decrease*. Now, let us consider in what our Lord could increase and in what His prophet could decrease. This difficulty is easily overcome when we remember that the people, seeing the wonderful mortification of John the Baptist, and his retirement in the desert far from all intercourse with men, thought he was Christ the Messiah. Whereas, seeing Jesus among publicans, conversing and eating with them, and not avoiding the company of sinners, they took Him for a prophet only, and not for the Christ. But what John said was literally fulfilled, when the time came that the Redeemer, Whom they had looked upon as a mere prophet, was recognized as the Christ, and that John the Baptist, taken for Christ, was then known only as His prophet. Then, indeed, was fulfilled what John said of Jesus: *He must increase, but I must decrease*. And our Lord increased in the esteem of men as soon as they recognized Who He in reality was; whilst the honor given to John decreased, when it became known that he was only the prophet of the Messiah. Thus the holiness of John the Baptist was preserved, because he remained humble. The greater number of those who wish to attain to greatness, very often by their proud thoughts and sentiments, fall deeply, and verify in their lives these words: *Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low*. For God is with the humble, and gives them His richest blessings; whereas He forsakes the heart of the proud man.
6. Again it is said: *And the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways plain*. These words will be fulfilled when the wicked, whose hearts are corrupted by injustice, endeavor to return to God by practicing Christian justice. And the rough ways are made plain, when hard and passionate hearts are softened and become peaceful through the grace of God. When the word of truth is not received, but finds an insensible heart, it is withdrawn, on account of the obstacles placed in its way. Whereas, when through the unction of the grace of God, we are softened and willingly receive the instructions and exhortations of God's ministry, the truth they announce, instead of finding rough ways, finds them smooth and plain, and thus easily penetrates the heart.
7. *And all flesh*, continues the Evangelist, *shall see the salvation of God*; that is, all men shall see Jesus Christ. But in this life all men cannot see the Redeemer. It seems, therefore, that the prophet spoke of the future, that he saw heaven open before him, and Jesus in His glory, surrounded by angels, apostles and saints, as He will come to judge the world. Then all men, both the just and the unjust, will see the Judge. The just, that they may receive the due reward of everlasting happiness; and the wicked, that they may be punished in everlasting torments for their sins and vices. Amen.