

First Reading: Isaiah 11:1-10

Second Reading: Romans 15:4-9

Gospel: Matthew 3:1-12

REPENT AND PRODUCE GOOD FRUIT TO RECEIVE CHRIST OUR SAVIOUR

The opening prayer today invites us to remove the things that hinder us from receiving Christ with joy. It is the call John the Baptist makes to us who, in one way or another or to a different extent, have been and may still be turning our lives, our families, and our society into a veritable wilderness. We may ask the two following questions: first, what is Christ coming for? And second, what are the things in our life and in our society that we need to remove if we really want to welcome Christ? The answer to the first question is: He comes so that with his spirit of wisdom he may strengthen our wisdom by which we will be able to understand and judge all our relationships with integrity and justice. He comes exactly to invite us and to empower us to go on working and struggling with him in order that we may make the wilderness of our lives and our society, our humanity and our environment, start, already now, to truly bloom. Then having finished our earthly journey, all our transformed lives will be gathered into his glory, into the fullness of life with him, as he welcomes us into his Kingdom. "Mwana wanchete olilira pansi" (a real orphan won't sit complaining/crying but will get out and till the land).

So it is now, yes, right now, this is the time when we Zambians need to sow the seeds of justice and peace in our families, small Christian communities and country, so as to be able to produce in plenty the good fruit that Jesus' Kingdom of truth demands. Why does he demand that we produce good fruit? Because he indeed is the one who gives us life and with it he also gives us the good seed that we need so that our life and the life of our world may truly flourish. This is when there is no longer hunger and thirst and when nobody grows weary but is filled with really good things and come to rejoice, as our Mother Mary, the mother of our Lord Jesus Christ rejoiced in her song of thanksgiving when the seed of God's Son was sown in her at the Annunciation (See Luke 1: 46-55). The seeds of justice and peace, of forgiveness and reconciliation, of mercy and of love, that God sows in the good soil of our lives and which we water with the sweat of our struggle we may already now start enjoying. Their appropriate fruit is a real sign of our sure hope that when all is made new everlastingly in Jesus Christ and all our good work are fully harvested.

Now we may come to our second question: what are the things in our lives that we need to remove if we really want to welcome Christ among us? If we really want to succeed in fulfilling Christ's purpose for us, we need to remove all those things that are fashioned by human wisdom alone and which are therefore not according to the very purpose and dignity for which God intended us in creating us. We should avoid using words like "iwe naine sitizakambisana mpaka kumanda" (you and I will never talk to each other until burial). In short, all too often, we fail to live up to our true humanity because our human wisdom by itself is so short-sighted and so limited that, however good it may be, we still would need Christ's spirit to counsel us. Truly, we need to know better what we should do in order that, first of all, we may recognise all that is lowering the true value of our personal and social life.

Moreover, we shall be able to find the means we need to seriously start changing those wrong values that have been causing so much harm to us and to our neighbours. We must change them into what is truly good for all, the common good. How can this really ever happen? Isaiah gives us the answer when he describes the Messiah in these terms: "On him the spirit of the Lord rests, a spirit of wisdom and insight, a spirit of counsel and power, a spirit of the knowledge and of the fear of God." Jesus Christ, God's Word and Wisdom, became human and dwelt among us in order that by taking our humanity to himself we may be enabled by him to share his wisdom that shows us the way and that empowers us to come to the fullness of our purpose and dignity in him and through him.

How may we come to discern the truth of our thoughts, calculations and choices in personal and social matters, in our families and our small Christian communities? We shall be able to discern correctly if we are ready to distinguish whether they are dictated by the Spirit of Christ or by the evil spirit. How do we know that we are being led by the Spirit of Christ? It is when we are moved to think and act like Jesus Christ himself, that is when we seek what is truly good not only for ourselves but also for others, We must particularly pay attention to those who are disadvantaged, those who suffer because of gender inequality, those who are undernourished while there is

plenty of good things for all in Zambia, those who are young but lack proper education and life supporting employment, etc.

Let's just be honest and take a clear look at recent events in Zambia. We should know all too well how the spirit of evil draws us: by a spirit of selfishness in seeking simply our own advantage at whatever cost, by pride when we look down on others and dominate them, and by all kinds of self-seeking opportunism that makes personal and social corruption so common. It is only in being ready to receive each other as God means us to do, as God's one human family, that we may be able to be ready to receive Christ among us, that is, in us and in our community. It is only then that we start to live according to our human dignity in greater harmony and peace, as Isaiah shows us in the graphic images that he paints portraying the healing of all kinds of divisions and antagonisms and all forms of pollutions in ourselves, in our society and in our environment. We are called to judge with integrity and equity the way God does and shows us and empowers us to do.

That is why Paul tells us not to lose hope and never to give up the effort and struggle to succeed in making our personal lives and our society always more human and more divine. We are assured that this is not only possible but that it is also guaranteed. Why? How? Because our God is always there beside us, always ready to help us along. He helps us especially in three ways: first, to follow his example and be tolerant with each other; secondly, and even better, that like him we start dealing with each other in a conciliatory and friendly way and not as enemies; thirdly, and perhaps what is more demanding for us, that with him and like him we humble ourselves and become servants of each other, as he showed us by the example of his washing his apostles' feet, a service that makes people ready even to forget themselves for the sake of others. After all, that is what Jesus Christ did.

In the Gospel of today, Matthew tells us that in baptism we are baptised first of all by the water that cleanses us from our wrong attitudes towards others, a baptism that opens us to Christ and to one other. Baptism by water disposes us to receive the baptism by fire and the Spirit, a baptism that Jesus Christ himself underwent on the Cross when he died and rose for us while we were yet sinners. This is a higher baptism, a baptism that empowers us, in the gift of Christ's Spirit, to keep struggling on, to walk in his way so that when all things are made new we may come to reign with him in his glory, in his Kingdom of peace and love, justice and integrity. Amen.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND SHARING IN SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

- What can help us, as individuals and in our small Christian communities, to discern the truth of our thoughts and choices in personal and social matters?
- What keeps us from losing hope in our lives, as individuals and as a community?
- How do we really experience the power of Baptism in our lives today?

SKETCH

Have one person acting as a very notorious character in community, drunkard and irresponsible. One day he or she meets a devout Christian, who helps the person to realise the need to act responsibly in community. The convert goes back to his or her community and contributes greatly to its welfare.

COMMUNITY PRAYERS

- We pray, Lord, for the Spirit of discerning the truth so that we may make rights choices, personally and in community. *Lord, hear our prayer! Lord graciously hear us!*
- We pray, Lord, for courage and not to lose hope in spite of the difficulties we go through. *Lord, hear our prayer! Lord graciously hear us!*
- We pray, Lord, for guidance in our fulfillment of the promises we made during Baptism. *Lord, hear our prayer! Lord graciously hear us!*