

**First Reading:** Isaiah 35:1-6.10

**Second Reading:** Romans 5:7-10

**Gospel:** Matthew 11:2-11

## TAKE HEART, OUR LIBERATOR IS COMING

In this season of Advent, the Church invites us to pray that we may celebrate the coming of Christ our Liberator with love and thanksgiving as we come nearer to Christmas. How can we Zambians do so unless we reflect on: what it is that Christ liberates us *FROM* and what does he liberate us *FOR*? A simple answer is that he came to liberate us from bondage and destruction so that we may live as free people capable of building up and enjoying our lives. Is not this something that we all wish for ourselves, for our children and for our neighbours? When Moses set the covenant of God before his people he asked them exactly this, whether they would accept it or not, whether they choose life or death (Deuteronomy 30:19)? Accepting the Covenant would be choosing to put their whole hope and trust in God who is the source, enhancement and fulfilment of life. Rejecting it, is either putting their hope and trust in themselves and not in God, or simply not to have any hope at all in life. That way life becomes truly burdensome and it is finally reduced to a wasteland where life cannot exist.

Now, what are we ourselves choosing, really? I suppose we would reply the way the people of Israel did when all cried out with one voice that they wanted to trust in God's Covenant. But does such an answer come from our hearts and minds or is it simply mere words? If we really want to mean what we say, we need to ask ourselves two questions: first of all, are we aware of and do we experience what we need to be liberated from in our lives as individuals, as families as small Christian communities, as the nation of Zambia? And secondly: are we aware and do we experience in practice, in our lives, that hope and trust, that love and thanksgiving that results from accepting and following Jesus Christ, the New Covenant, who is continually encouraging and empowering us to make the desert of our life bloom?

So, to answer the first question - what is it that we want Jesus Christ to liberate us *FROM*? Let us first look at our situation here in Zambia and, having done that, we then begin to get the answer to the related question – what is it that Jesus is ready to liberate us *FOR*. In announcing the coming of the liberating Messiah, the Prophet Isaiah prophesied what Jesus himself was to show to the disciples of John the Baptist when he sent them to ask him: was he the one who was to come or should they have to wait for another? Isaiah cheers us up telling us not to lose heart but to strengthen our weary hands, to steady our trembling knees and to take courage and have new interest in life. “Dzedzese dzedzese salingana n’kugweratu” – staggering is not as bad as falling down completely! Frustrations or pain may be there, but with God's grace we shall overcome. However, he wants us first to look at our unhappy and desolate situation, that wasteland into which we may bring ourselves and others by our wrong desires, thoughts and actions and by the good we fail to do. We have to find out those things, attitudes and values in our lives that keep souring our hearts and our relationships in the family or among friends or neighbours, in the small Christian communities, in schools, at work, in business or even in politics, both local and national.

That is why we cry with the Psalmist: “Where does my help come from?” (Psalm 120:1). We may start looking for the means that could get us out of that hole we have been digging for ourselves and for others. We may start looking for ways and means to straighten our relationships. But all too quickly we may say to ourselves that we have tried so much and all to no purpose. And the answer to our faint-heartedness is: “My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth!” That is why Isaiah's message tells us that God's Messiah, the Christ, is he who comes to offer us a guaranteed chance to be able to make every effort and succeed to get out of any mess we have been putting ourselves and others into all along. He helps us to look at those signs that show how our God and liberator Jesus Christ never fails to come to our help and what he can do for those who put their faith and trust in him who is certain to be forever faithful to his promise of liberation. Thus we shall have every reason to take courage and start walking with our heads held high and in our turn to start encouraging and helping others to do the same, especially those close to us, in our families, neighbourhoods and small Christian communities.

Let us just have a look at those signs to see what they can do for us. God opens our ears whenever we become deaf to each other's feelings, needs, and to whatever they are trying to tell us. Then he helps us to listen closely to them and understand them. He opens our eyes when we become blind to the truth about the harmful way in which we have been conducting our personal and social life. Thereby he makes us be able to walk freely along his way of peace and justice so that we and our country Zambia will no longer keep dragging our feet in the effort to make poverty history and to bring about a truly equitable and just development for all. He looses our tongues when we have been used to pretend to be dumb by failing to speak out the truth whenever we see corruption around us. That is how he raises us up and helps us to raise up, in our turn, those who are bowed down, especially women who suffer discrimination in our families and on many levels of society at large, like education, health-care, and employment. He also changes our behaviour towards strangers, like refugees and supposed social outcasts, like people suffering from AIDS, and we start protecting them and plead their cause. Last but not least, he teaches and enables us not only how to care lovingly for orphans and

widows, and especially the victims of HIV and AIDS, but also to change our family and social behaviour that might promote HIV and AIDS.

These indeed are the signs of those small and great works that Jesus gave the power to do to all those who put their faith in him. It is when we start performing seriously and regularly those very signs that we do enter into the historical process of the fulfilment of Christ's Kingdom. That process is already starting to be rooted and to bear fruit in us and in our midst here in Zambia. What will be our choice when we see these life-giving signs of what the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ can do and is doing among us? Shall we welcome Jesus and become his disciples and continue to work joyfully with him exactly those signs? Jesus himself told us that without him we can do nothing but with him we can even move the enormous mountains of injustice and oppression. These are the mountains that we inflict on others as well as those we are made to bear, which threaten our life and the life of the world we live in, including our precious and beautiful environment.

Now the question is: how do we go on along the process of our working for our liberation in doing the work of Jesus' Kingdom of Justice and Peace? Maybe we may get frightened when we are faced by this seemingly hopeless and difficult task. Today's reading from the letter of St. James shows us how to go about it so that we neither get scared nor try to run too fast only to stumble and give up. First of all we need to train ourselves in the virtue of patience and not to give up whenever there are any setbacks, small or big. Sometimes the slowness of the process makes us frustrated when things don't work exactly as we plan them or we don't see directly the fruit of our labour. But in learning to be patient we learn also how to wait actively and never passively for the gradual but consistent development and final outcome of the reforms and changes that we have been patiently working so hard for in our communities and in Zambia. How much we Zambians need that patience in the struggle to have a good new Constitution!

On the way we would certainly see the need of resolving or of clearing up any conflicting issues, even conflicts of interest in our small Christian communities that could ultimately block our way forward. How shall we resolve such conflicts and become reconciled? It is, first of all, by looking at each other with mutual respect as friends and not as antagonists. In this way we can seek together in truth and love to overcome what keeps making us pull the opposite way instead of pulling together to seek the common good. It is only with stubborn patience and active waiting that we can manage not to lose heart in the long and often tortuous process of bringing about peace and justice. Instead we take courage and we never give up if only we shall never lose our faith in Jesus who has overcome the power of darkness and who continues to enlighten our way and to lighten our burden.

Yes, this is how we shall be able to take heart and start dispelling sorrow and lament, injustice and oppression. It is only this way that we shall already be able to celebrate the coming of our beloved Liberator Jesus Christ with love and thanksgiving, with true joy and gladness.

#### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND SHARING IN SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES**

- What it is that we can identify around us that Christ liberates us *FROM* and what does he liberate us *FOR*?
- Moses asked the people to choose between life and death. What are the signs in our families, small Christian communities, nation, that we are really choosing life?
- Does the Kingdom of Christ have any special messages for politics today in our nation of Zambia? What are the messages and what difference would they make in the lives of all of us?

#### **SKETCH**

Have one person act as beggar, carrying a heavy load and some passers-by stops, washes and feeds him or her. The beggar now moves around in joy and happiness.

#### **COMMUNITY PRAYERS**

- We pray, Lord, that you teach us to know what you came to liberate us from so that we may teach others to know what true liberation is. *Lord, hear our prayer! Lord graciously hear us!*
- We pray, Lord, that you will guide our small Christian communities to always make life-giving choices. *Lord, hear our prayer! Lord graciously hear us!*
- We pray, Lord, that we become signs of your Kingdom, signs of love, peace, justice and joy. *Lord, hear our prayer! Lord graciously hear us!*