

## Seeds of Joy, Seeds of Hope

Recently I was visiting my family. It had been a while since I took the Metro, and I was somehow struck by how fast things are changing in the way people look and behave. Seeing almost everyone bent over, glued to the screens of their phones—almost ignoring their friends, spouses and even little children close to them—I couldn't but think about what St Bernard called "anima curva" (curved soul), that is, how human beings tend to be self-centered, worrying constantly about themselves, instead of looking up to their Creator with gratitude. I hoped that at least the Christmas lights, already shining in the main streets, would give their necks some relief as they raised their heads to check them out.

As I was walking around, I took in faces and situations, and offered them all to the Lord, while I asked him this question, what are they looking for? Everything seemed to move so fast, and peoples of all kinds, both the young and the old, seemed to be trapped in that rhythm. I wondered if all those screens were not for many some kind of safe heaven, where you could move freely, no matter who you are, without questions being asked; where you could be curious and play, like when you were a child; where you could simply wander and do nothing, letting time pass by; or you could dream about travels, presents or friends, that you could almost touch and possess even if only through a fake window. I prayed and wondered, "What are they looking for, Lord, and how can you knock at the door of their lives?" A video going viral might be more effective than angels nowadays.

When I came back to the monastery I was welcomed by the Sisters and the Advent liturgy. How beautiful it is! When I would hear the words of the prophet Isaiah, "Comfort, O comfort my people, says the Lord." Or "Get up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, ... say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God,'" (Is. 40) I would think of all the people I had seen, I had prayed for, and I would try to cry into the ears of their hearts, "Here is your God; only him has the comfort you are looking for, only he."

The day I left the monastery to visit my family, there was one of those Gospels at the end of the liturgical year that seem to be difficult to apply to our lives, "As it was in the days of Noah, so will it be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark. And they were oblivious, until the flood came and swept them all away. So will it be at the coming of the Son of Man "(Mt 24:37-39). I didn't have an apocalyptic revelation, but I recognized a call in those words. The Son of Man is coming, he is always coming, with each breath, with the sun and the rain, each time he knocks at the door of our conscience inviting us to do good and avoid evil. Jesus is coming now at Christmas, and he will definitely come at the end of time, but most people are oblivious, and they are being carried away by a flood of sadness, loneliness, anxiety, injustice, and sin. What are you called to do? What am I called to do?

We religious refrain from marriage and some other common and good things to be a reminder for others that "HE IS COMING". Love for Christ and all humanity become the zeal that moves us to step out and walk against the current to become this living reminder of his coming for a world which searches without knowing, which thirsts and rapidly consumes but without being satisfied.

At times this call may feel a bit like that of John the Baptist, another Advent figure, a voice calling in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord" (Jn 1:23). But above all it feels like Mary's call, the greatest Advent figure, a call to be completely for the Lord, a call to belong to the Lord so that we can give ourselves to others according to his word.

These days I was again pondering Our Lady of Guadalupe's words to Saint Juan Diego, "Nothing at all should alarm you, should trouble you, nor in any way disturb your countenance, your heart. And do not be afraid of this pestilence, nor of any other pestilence, or any rasping hardship. For am I not here, I your Mother? Are you not in the cool of my shadow? In the breeziness of my shade? Is it not I that am the source of your contentment? Are you not cradled in my mantle, cradled in the crossing of my arms? Is there anything else for you to need?" For those who don't love Mary, our Mother, those words might be incomprehensible, even out of place. No one but Mary can offer the comfort and reassurance that Our Lady offered Juan Diego on the hill of Tepeyac. All human beings fail, no matter how powerful, smart or well intentioned. Mary is talking about another kind of comfort; the same one the Lord told the prophet Isaiah to proclaim to the People of Israel. Mary is offering the comfort she herself experienced, and that made her the Mother of him who is the source of all true comfort, contentment and joy. For Mary, the Lord was not only the consolation of her sorrows, but the true source of her joy, of her whole being.

What would you say if on Christmas Day the Son of Mary would quietly speak to your heart words like these, "Nothing should trouble you, should disquiet you. Is it not I that am the source of your contentment? Is there anything else for you to need?" Don't reply too fast. Look deeper inside you. What would your answer be? Sincerely. Maybe this is the first question we need to face in truth to be able to discern and listen to any other words of the Lord. Don't be afraid if you realize you are hesitating. Only Mary was able to give a complete 'yes' to this question. Being without sin, she could fully trust her Father and Creator. But when we, without making excuses, embrace both the fragility and the depth of our desire for making Jesus the source of our contentment, beyond other things, beyond any achievements or the approval of others, a seed of joy is planted in our heart, a seed of hope is planted for our world. A seed was planted on Tepeyac with the timid responses of Saint Juan Diego, a seed that grew in his life and then became so big a tree that has sheltered millions of peoples, like the mustard seed of Jesus' parable (see Mt 13:31-32).

The Lord is coming, now, on Christmas, and at the end of time. He looks for those who would welcome him to plant in their lives a new seed of joy that nothing will take away, a seed of hope that will remind others that there is a heaven beyond their screens and fears, a kingdom wanting to sprout and grow more and more. This joy, this hope is freely offer to all, but it is not cheap; it demands all we have, all we are, like a tiny Baby laying in a manger.

Sr Maria Gonzalo, OCSO

Our Lady of the Angels Monastery