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The Third Sunday of Advent (A)

The question John the Baptist poses to Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?" is a question laden with hope (Matthew 11:3). This question is predicated by a deep faith in the one "who comes to save you" (Isaiah 35:4).

We have before us in today's readings two questions central to the faith of Jesus Christ: in what do we hope and what is salvation?

If we look down into the depths of our souls we will find there a deep longing for one thing. Some will fully recognize this deep longing for what it is, others will dimly recognize it and others will reject it forthwith. What is this one thing for which we long? It is the blessed life, the happy life.

When the Forerunner of the Lord sent his disciples to Jesus asking, "Are you the one?" John wanted to know, more so for us than for himself, that Jesus is the one in whom this blessed life, this happy life, is to be found. He wanted to hear that Christ Jesus is salvation and hope.

But what is this happy life? If we look more closely at what we mean by it we find that

we have no idea what we ultimately desire, what we would really like. We do not know this reality at all; even in those moments when we think we can reach out and touch it, it eludes us... All we know is that it is not this [life]. Yet in not knowing, we know that this reality must exist.¹

What do I mean?

As we draw closer to the celebration of the Lord's birth, the readings from the prophet Isaiah grow ever more stirring. Today he says, "The desert and the parched land will exult; the steppe will rejoice and bloom. They will bloom with abundant flowers, and rejoice with joyful song" (Isaiah 35:1-2). Who can hear these words and not be moved with hope?

Or what about Jesus' answer to John's disciples? Jesus told them to look and listen and report to John what they saw and heard. They returned to him, saying, "The blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them" (Matthew 11:5). Can anyone who truly listens to the voice of the prophet not be roused?

Deep within us is the *certain* hope that our desire for the happy life can be fulfilled, otherwise we could not hope for it in the first place. This is why our spirits lift when hearing these passages: we know them to be true.

For centuries the people cried out, "Lord, come and save us," a cry that we repeat today because of our hope

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi*, 11.

(Responsorial antiphon). In the words and deeds of Jesus the words of the psalmist are fulfilled. Jesus says to the disciples of the Baptist, "Yes, I am the one who is to come. I have come to save you. I am he."

This then is our hope, born of faith, and our salvation: it is nothing less than Jesus Christ. It is he who is the happy life, it is he for whom our hearts yearn. Remember the words of Saint Augustine: "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

Everyday of our lives we look for something or someone to satisfy this deep longing that we cannot fill, but how often do we turn to the Lord to quench this holy thirst? We go off in all directions - each leading away from him - and as we do we, too, wander off into the desert, and how many deserts there are!

There is the desert of poverty ... of hunger and thirst ... of abandonment ... of loneliness, of destroyed love. There is the desert of God' darkness, the emptiness of souls no longer aware of their dignity or the goal of human life.²

Yet it is precisely in the midst of the desert that Jesus speaks to us: "What did you go out to the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? ... Then why did you go out? To see a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet" (Matthew 11:7, 9).

The people went out to the desert seeking the one who would save them. They found John the Baptist and he pointed them to

² Pope Benedict XVI, Inaugural Homily, April 2005.

Jesus. They found what they sought. They found the happy and blessed life, they found the Messiah, they found their God. Some accepted him and others rejected him. The choice was theirs as it is ours.

How do we know that salvation is found in Christ, that he is the source and foundation of our hope? How do we know that Christ Jesus *is* salvation and hope? We know this because in him we learn in a profound way that

Man is worth so much to God that he himself became man in order to *suffer with* man in an utterly real way - in flesh and blood - as is revealed to us in the account of Jesus' Passion. Hence in all human suffering we are joined by one who experiences and carries that suffering *with us*; hence *consolatio* is present in all suffering, the consolation of God's compassionate love - and so that star of hope rises.³

This star of hope was the same star that the Magi saw at the birth of Jesus so many years ago. The light of this star, the light of hope, continues to shine upon us in the darkness of this world leading us ever closer to the Crucified and Risen Lord who is near and who is coming to us.

His *parousia*, his Second Coming, is not something for us to fear, but is rather the very thing for which we hope. This is why Isaiah tells us to "strengthen the hands that are feeble, make firm the knees that are weak, say to those whose hearts are frightened: Be strong, fear not! Here is your God" (Isaiah 35:3-4).

³ *Spe salvi*, 39.

We know that when he comes again all will be made right; justice and mercy will triumph. We know that "the Lord is near," (*Introit*) that "the Judge is standing before the gates" (James 5:9).

Let us then turn our gaze toward him who is our hope and our salvation, for when he comes, "those whom the Lord has ransomed will return and enter Zion singing, crowned with everlasting joy; they will meet with joy and gladness, sorrow and mourning will flee" (Isaiah 35:10). Amen.