

## Advent 2

Have you heard the story about an adolescent boy praising God for His greatness? He says to God: “O God, how great You are, and I am so small, and there are so many like me. Although I am young, I know that I will grow old and die in sixty or seventy years if I have good health, or sooner if I get sick. O God, what are a million years to You? And God answers him saying: “To me a million years are like a minute.” And then the boy continues: “How small all our concerns must seem to you, O God. For instance, we think so much of money. But for You what is a million dollars?” And God answers him saying: “For me a million dollars is like a penny.” Then the boy grows silent and begins to reflect. After awhile he begins his prayer again and says: “O God, could You give me a penny?” God answers: “Yes, just wait a minute.”

That little story is relevant to our readings for today, especially the second reading from the second letter of Peter. Some scripture scholars hold that this letter may be the latest document of the NT, composed in the first or second quarter of the second century, so between 100 and

150 AD. Indeed, this Second Letter of St. Peter had a hard time making it into the canon of Scripture but finally did so, but not until around the 400s AD. Origin, a great intellectual of our church who lived in the second and third centuries, from 185 to 254 AD, accepted both letters attributed to Peter as canonical, but he also reported that some of his contemporaries rejected this second letter. The reason for their rejection of Second Peter was the fact that it seems to reflect a later time and therefore cannot have come from St. Peter. Today that is accepted by biblical scholars as a fact. It does not come from Peter but is a later writing attributed to Peter by a literary convention popular at the time.

One theme of the letter which makes it hard to believe that it could come from Peter himself is that of the second coming. It defends the belief that the Lord Jesus will return and rejects those who scoff at this belief because so much time has elapsed and the Lord has still not come. But that was not a problem in Peter's days. The earliest church could and did live expecting that the Lord would return very soon. Not much time had elapsed since the resurrection. But that was a problem for the church in the second century when this letter was composed. Some wanted to jettison this belief in a

second coming. This letter says no to that effort. The Lord will come, the letter tells us. It recalls what the Lord himself said in the Gospels, that he will come like a thief in the night. And if the delay seems to be very long, we should remember that for the Lord a thousand years is like one day. Moreover, this delay is an expression of God's patience. He is giving us time to get our house in order.

Do we still accept this belief? The letter is part of the canon. Therefore, if we want to think with the Church, we have to accept this belief. Moreover, we witness to this belief every Sunday when we recite the Nicene Creed and say: "And I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Isn't that a description of the Second Coming?"

But today's other readings, the First Reading from Isaiah and Mark's Gospel, go in a different direction. If the reading from 2 Peter is about the future, about the second coming, our Gospel reading today from Mark reaches back to something written five or six hundred years before its time. Mark, believed to be the first of the Four Gospels, written perhaps in the 70s AD, begins by quoting Second Isaiah, which was

written almost 600 years before then, in the 500s BC, and describes the return of the Jews from exile in Babylon under the new power of that time, the Persians. Second Isaiah wrote: “A voice cries out: In the desert prepare the way of the lord.” Then it goes on to describe in the most romantic of terms something we would describe in the most ordinary way: the building of a road. Second Isaiah says that the Lord will make it easy for the people to return to Jerusalem. A beautiful straight and level road will be built for them. Even today we can appreciate a newly paved highway. But we won’t come close to Second Isaiah’s magnificent description of the road God will create to lead the exiles back home: “Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill shall be made low; the rugged land shall be made plain, the rough country, a broad valley.”

Mark sees John the Baptist’s preaching in the desert as the voice which Isaiah described as calling for the building of this new road: “A voice cries out: “In the desert prepare the way of the Lord.” But Mark now adds something new. The voice, that is, John the Baptist, turns the attention of his listeners to someone else. He may be on center stage for the moment, but he is telling his audience to await the entrance of the

main character. And when this main character appears, lo and behold, he is going to look very much like the God whom Isaiah saw as coming to the exiles at the end of their journey home. “Here is your God,” Second Isaiah begins. “Here comes with power the Lord God, who rules by his strong arm.” So a typical description of a King God. But then comes a dramatic shift in the description of God follows: “Like a shepherd he feeds his flock; in his arms he gathers the lambs, carrying them in his bosom, and leading the ewes with care.”

Here is the Lord Jesus, the God we believe will come at the end of the world to judge the living and the dead, foreshadowed in the description which the 6<sup>th</sup> century prophet Second Isaiah gives of the God who will lead the Jewish exiles back from Babylon to Jerusalem. That we have such a God should indeed give us comfort and consolation. Yes, Isaiah’s opening cry can be ours as well: “Comfort, give comfort to my people, says your God.”