

Second Sunday of Advent
December 7, 2003

By Father Charles Bowes

Baruch 5:1-9
Philippians 1:4-6, 8-11
Luke 3:1-6

God acts through us to prepare for Gods coming

There are two great burdens our Catholic people carry into this holy season. One is the guilt and shame of the sex abuse scandal that has rocked our Catholic tradition. It weighs heavily upon us all, as priests and people alike. We are all ashamed, burdened, hurt.

Another burden carried by many of our Catholic parishioners who are parents and grandparents is what they consider to be the apostasy, or lack of faith, in their children and grandchildren. Having been brought up in the pre-reformed church, their responsibilities to the church as parents were carefully defined: They had to make their kids go to church or risk losing them to perdition. Or, as one irate mother put it to a pastor who had accepted her son's decision not to continue with confirmation classes, "Because of you, my son is going to Hell!"

While not denying that possibility, it is important to remember a tradition of good news and joyful hope dating way back at least to the 7th century before Christ and to the prophet Baruch. As secretary to the prophet Jeremiah, Baruch faced the same impossible situation of alienation from God with no means of re-establishing the relationship. He reiterated to his people a fundamental belief that religion often

overlooks...that our faith is not in our abilities to maintain connection with God, but in God's ability to maintain connection with us.

And, in the midst of the devout of his time, with all hope of salvation for their children and for their religious tradition lost, Baruch envisioned a miraculous return. God, ever faithful, would watch over their children and their faith and bring them back.

That being said, we Catholics still ask, "How do we bear the shame of scandal?" Parents still ask, "How do I get my kids to come back to church?" It is important to acknowledge that people stop going to church for a reason: It's boring, it's meaningless, it's hypocritical, or a hurt - real or imagined - was inflicted. And to those who stop going, the reasons are valid and acceptable. But then we, as faithful Catholics, try to understand our mission: We are witnesses to God's faithfulness, not our own. We focus our attention on God's ability and willingness to bring back the children, not on the children's unwillingness to continue with the church. We focus our attention on God's ability to bring good even out of scandal and shame. The power of conversion lies not in fearful dread of human sinfulness, but in joyful hope and confidence in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Way back in the 7th century before Christ, the way back to Jerusalem from Babylon seemed impossible. There were enormous obstacles. The

Babylonian empire was history's greatest. The Jews had no hope of rescue. Who would be strong enough to get the job done? And besides, a conquering nation would simply inherit the slave population - the Jews - and continue exploiting them for their labor. And based on the covenant, the Jews couldn't do what they had to do to get God's attention and work a deal for deliverance.

Perhaps the best expression of Judah's impossible situation was the image of the physical journey from Babylon to Jerusalem. There were huge mountain ranges and enormous valleys, and the roads winding through them were often washed out and impassable. To this hopeless image, the prophet Isaiah addressed himself in chapter 40, referred to in Luke chapter 3 today. Could Judah overcome the obstacles standing between them and a return to Jerusalem? Actually, no. But God could - and did!

Advent, therefore, is the time when we turn our focus back to God's abiding will to save us in His almighty power to accomplish all that He has begun in us and in our children, despite all evidence to the contrary of scandal and shame and faithlessness. When things seem darkest, as they do in this seasonal approach to winter, and hope fades, the light of God's love and forgiveness shines forth, even in the darkness of sin and death. For God makes straight the crooked ways and fills in the valleys. And through us, this Advent season, God will indeed make us whole. This we believe.

**GOD ACTS THROUGH US TO PREPARE
FOR GOD'S COMING.**