

## **Homily on the occasion of the Master's visit to Soriano Calabro**

For us Christians, Advent is really a time of hope. On this day in which we also celebrate the memory of Saint Dominic in Soriano, it is good to have listened to this Gospel in which we are told that, after being imprisoned, John the Baptist dialogued with Jesus. Is it not said that if John the Baptist is the evening star, Saint Dominic of Guzman is like the morning star? John the Baptist is the model for preachers of hope.

Hope is first of all a matter of patience, the apostle James tells us illustrating his point with the image of the farmer. Today we live mostly in a time of impatience. Everything has to be fast, and it has to be quickly accomplished, and if this does not happen, one easily abandons the goals one had set. It is totally different for the farmer who knows that one cannot make the plants or the trees bigger by forcing them to grow. Rather, while caring for them, he trusts the course of nature, the fertility of the earth. Does not Advent give us the opportunity to discover again the patience of our God, and also his trust in the humanity he created? His patience, for God has introduced his work of grace in the history of humanity. Frequently, this history does not correspond to what he wants for us. This is testified by the divisions and wars between humans, the times in which humanity refuses to recognize the presence of God, and also the times in which the natural course of things produce catastrophes that bring about a lot of suffering and much despair. But God, tirelessly, proposes his alliance with us and invites us to lift up our eyes beyond what makes us believe that death would have the last word, and to let our hearts desire a fuller life that is more just, more humane. God's patience is sustained by the trust he puts in humanity and in its capacity to be one day adjusted to him. Is there a God greater than our God who has put such faith in humanity that he took on the human condition and came begging for hospitality among those to whom he himself has given life? To prepare ourselves to welcome God who comes as a child to beg our hospitality, is to let ourselves be greatly moved by God's trust and to learn from him how to be patient. Together with John the Baptist, we are preachers of this first coming, the source of our hope.

Frequently, however, we would like to be more effective, to see more clearly how we could participate in the history of humanity and transform it, precisely because of our faith. We would like to have the courage of our hope. How we would have liked that the arid country be already covered with flowers, and that the desert exults and cries for joy! Or rather, how we would like to testify that, even in arid times, Christ never stops coming to live our history and to carry it together with us, to be somehow witnesses of the second "coming" of the Son of God. In saying this, I think particularly of the friars and sisters of the Order of Saint Dominic who live in places in which this expectation is particularly difficult because of the structural poverty that has been installed there, because of the violence against believers and against people of good will, because of the foolishness of humanity that puts its trust in illusory power struggles rather than in the capacity of humanity to walk on the roads of holiness and peace. What can we do? This morning the prophet gave us a fairly simple indication: "Strengthen all weary hands, steady all trembling knees and say to the faint-hearted, "Be strong! Do not be afraid. Here is your God." The crucible of hope is compassion. It is not an attitude which, sensible to human misery, would only lament but do nothing. No, it is a true engagement through which, in the face of the misery in which some of our fellow human beings we meet are immersed, we take on ourselves their destiny and try to find a way in which to help them find again the courage to live. This was Dominic's compassion, we are told, that made him sell his books to make some poor people live, that made him take time to welcome in his love for God all those men and women he met on the road. Dominic's hope is the fruit of both his trust in God who cannot want the death of humans, and of his trust in humanity that is capable of happiness, for it is capable of freedom and truth. Many years ago in Haiti I saw the birth of a movement of small Christian communities called "Fraternities". Frequently they were fraternities of poor people who

could not engage themselves in big projects that could suddenly transform their country. Because of Christ's fraternity with the world, these groups were formed to witness that it is possible for humans to build fraternity among themselves. Through very simple gestures and actions, they seek to help those who were crushed by misery or by dictatorship, to bring a message of peace to those who were rendered deaf by the sound of violence, to show how the future of mankind could be different from resignation to a condition of a violated humanity. Yes, they are simple gestures of fraternity which planted among human beings such a strength that allowed them to resist despair. To witness to the hope that is in us, is to announce the presence of the Christ at the heart of the concrete history of humanity by concretely committing ourselves to fraternity, the sign of God's solidarity with humanity.

Is not this the message that Jesus sent to John the Baptist? The blind see again, and the lame walk, those suffering from virulent skin-diseases are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life and the good news is proclaimed to the poor! John the Baptist could have been in despair on seeing that he was condemned to death for having dared to speak God's truth, that is to say for having proclaimed that one cannot use God in order to assert powers that humans would use against other humans. He could have been in despair also because, having proclaimed the coming of Him who was the only Messiah of God, he had not yet seen the world change as much as he would have desired. Perhaps, in despair too because he sensed that by inviting people to be in solidarity as the Son of God himself was with the people on the wrong side of the world, Jesus himself ran the risk of being in turn rejected and put to death. And so the answer Jesus sent was quite clear: John the Baptist was right to announce that with the coming of the Son of God among human beings the promise was fulfilled which proclaimed that God would overturn the values of the world in order to create again a joyful humanity starting from "people of little value": the least in the Kingdom is even greater than him. Advent time is an invitation to direct our hope not anymore according to human criteria but according to the criteria of the last coming of the Son of man. The goal of hope is not to dream of a world that resembles our legitimate but limited ambitions of happiness. For us Christians, the goal of hope is that the life of Christ be given tirelessly to us so that we could live, even now, of his resurrection. This is the life-giving energy that overcomes death and, on the last day, will be accomplished in the full presence of our God. This is what the prophet has already said: they will see the glory of God and an endless happiness will make their faces shine!