

2nd Sunday of Advent

The television schedules frequently include 'make-over' programmes of one sort or another. Some are houses - others people's style of dress or even physical appearance. They provide relatively cheap programming for the TV companies – no expensive sets and a couple of presenters instead of a cast of actors. They provide an opportunity to snoop inside someone's house without a sense of guilt – they have invited us in. We all have different tastes and ideas of decor or dress style. It is rather more questionable when this moves on to physical appearance. Advertising puts on none to subtle pressure to conform to an ideal that is often unrealistic or even unattainable. Magazine pictures can be touched up and adjusted to remove skin flaws or give someone proportions that could not be attained in real life. All such programmes rely for their appeal on some kind of dissatisfaction as to how things are. If we didn't mind what we looked like or what people thought of our appearances or our homes there would be little incentive to watch them. Shops such as Homebase and B & Q would soon go bust!

The Prophet Baruch in our first reading envisages a make-over for the people of Israel. Jerusalem has seen its walls in ruins and its people exiled. This is symbolised by the robe of mourning. Now God is coming to visit his people. This will not do! Jerusalem must put on the beauty of God's glory, wrap around herself the cloak of God's integrity and wear a diadem on her head. The exiles are to return. The whole environment must be reshaped to welcome them. Mountains will be flattened and valleys filled in. The countryside will be landscaped with forests and fragrant trees. Note that this is not a human dissatisfaction on the part of the people. They have got used to their situation and come to expect nothing better. This is why God has sent his prophet to wake them up and show them what could be. God is not happy with their appearance. He will send in a team to transform them. He has a vision of what could be.

In the time of Baruch the fulfilment of this dream lay in the distant future. God's project remained on hold but preparations continued. In the fullness of time he sent the Angel Gabriel to Mary with the message that she had been chosen to become the mother of the Messiah. He also sent his messenger to Zechariah and Elizabeth. They were to have a son who would prepare the way for the Lord's coming. God's plan begins to unfold in public with the message of John the Baptist in today's Gospel. "Prepare a way for the Lord!"

God's project has begun but we have to opt into that project. We have to invite him in to give our lives a 'make-over'. What awaits us is the fulfilment of our potential – God's dream for us. He wants to landscape our garden and fill it with fragrant plants. He wants to strip off our dowdy clothes and robe us in his beauty and glory – the qualities of peace and integrity, honour and devotedness. It is no more impossible than the transformations we see on the television but much more profound. If there is an obstacle it lies in our unwillingness to change or failure to see how different we could be. This is the true meaning of repentance. Repentance is not about feeling guilty – although sometimes we may well feel guilty, and rightly so. It is a recognition that we have fallen short of God's target and vision for us and a willingness to take a different direction. The Hebrew word for 'repent' is very concrete. It means to turn around physically. The Greek word means to change one's mind, or way of understanding.

Allow God to give you a make over. Bring to him in the Sacrament of Reconciliation what you think needs to be changed or could be better even if you are not sure how this could be or think it unattainable. Nothing is impossible for God. He has a vision for you and through the grace of the sacrament can wrap you in his own glory and beauty.