

4 Advent (C)- The value of each individual

Today St Luke presents to us one of the most tender and beautiful scenes in all of the Gospels:

John the Baptist, still an **unborn child**, recognises the presence of the Lord and Saviour conceived in Mary's womb and rejoices at His coming.

This little creature, still not yet fully formed for life in this world, exults at the creator's love for humanity - and for the world - that is revealed in the person of Jesus!

One important message that this Gospel passage has for us that we do not have to be fully and perfectly formed to be valuable in the sight of God – to know the presence and power of the Lord – to experience his love – and to express due praise. We do not have to be perfect physically, nor mentally, nor morally, nor spiritually.

We may think that this is obvious. But unfortunately that is not the case.

Up to and including our own generation there have been - and are - those who regard the malformed, or the handicapped as cursed or rejected by God, or as not deserving of our respect, or of a place in our society – not worthy even of living. It is felt that somehow their presence diminishes the quality of the human race, or of the nation.

The notions purveyed by the Nazi eugenicists still persist - among us in this country.

But the Gospel clearly says that the Lord **comes** to the physically imperfect – they are **precious** to him – indeed, they **glorify** him.

Recognition of the radical value of each and every human person – no matter what their condition might be - has not been always evident, even in the Church.

Until quite recently the mentally sick and handicapped – that is, people with 'learning difficulties' - were not considered to be properly disposed to receive the sacraments. This was the case even though very often such people are more sensitive to God's presence and action than others who appear to enjoy good mental health. All too often the mentally able are distracted and confused by the many attractive things around them that clamour for their attention.

It is not just that the mentally and physically handicapped are deserving of our care – which they are. More than this - they are to be regarded as **having a special contribution to make** to our society.

This has been the great teaching and example of Jean Vanier, the founder of the Houses of Light, those longstanding communities of able and disabled persons.

Throughout the Gospel, in many passages, we can see clearly enough that Jesus has as much respect for the mentally ill and emotionally disturbed and spiritually astray as he does for the physically sick and disabled. He has as much concern for them as for anyone else. Such persons are frequently brought to him and He gives them his fullest attention.

There is another attitude that is contradicted by the Gospel of Jesus – but which we often find **within our own hearts**:

Far too many of us persist down the years of our lives in the mistaken belief that we will not know the touch of God's love because we are weak and sinful. As though God keeps the outpouring of his love for those who have already **achieved** sanctity and we will not experience such grace until we have attained true 'holiness of life'!

This too gainsays the Gospel which proclaims that God loves us **in** our sinfulness, and comes **into** our sinful world and into our sinful **lives**.

Even in our sin we can know his presence and his power – and be 'amazed' all the more.

In our sinfulness, indeed, we can be God's **instruments** – **agents - of his will**. God can and does work through us - despite our frailty and shortcomings.

What is asked of us is **not** that we become **perfect** but that we **try to do God's will**.

In this earnest attempt to be **obedient** we open up the door to God's love and God will enter into our hearts and lives - and we will **experience God's power**.

We do **not** have to attain perfection first.

We do not have to make **amends** for all our past faults.

We do not have to **appease** God with our devotions and our sacrifices.

All we have to do is to have in our hearts the sentiment that the author of the Letter to the Hebrews – today's second Reading - finds in the heart of Christ: *Here I am, Lord. I come to do your will.*

Mary had this spirit of trusting obedience – and so the power of God filled her: *Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done unto me according to your will.*

Today we should ask for her prayer that **we** may be filled with that same **responsive** Spirit and so make Christ more present in the daily world of which we are a part.