

The prophet Isaiah lived in a time of turmoil in Jewish history. He spoke against injustice and iniquity, calling on all to repent from their sinfulness and turn to God in trust so that through their faith they might be saved. While he says that many will die due to their sins, he foretells a coming Messiah who will establish peace and justice on earth and lead many to salvation.

He describes this time of peace and justice in evocative terms in today's first reading. There we hear, "Justice shall be the band around his waist, and faithfulness a belt upon his hips. Then the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf and the young lion shall browse together, with a little child to guide them. The cow and the bear shall be neighbors, together their young shall rest; the lion shall eat hay like the ox. The baby shall play by the cobra's den, and the child shall lay his hand on the adder's lair. There shall be no harm or ruin on my holy mountain."

Many centuries later, John the Baptist, a figure reminiscent of the prophet Isaiah, also called on those around him to repent from their sins and turn to God, saying that the one who Isaiah prophesized was drawing near. He warned everyone that it was not enough to simply say that they repented from their sins, but that we must "prepare the way of the Lord" and produce good fruit as evidence of our repentance, warning that every tree which does not bear good fruit will be cast into the eternal fire. Much like with Isaiah, everything John the Baptist did pointed towards the coming Messiah, instructing everyone to place their trust in this Lamb of God who will bring about the reign of God's peace in this world.

As Christians, we believe that this foretold Messiah is none other than Jesus Christ who came into the world and offered Himself as the unblemished sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. And yet, as Christians we must also wrestle with the fact that God's kingdom has not yet fully been realized in this world. We do not yet fully live

in a peaceful world where the lion can lay down with the lamb. The Scriptures teach us that this prophesied day of peace will finally come at the end of the ages when Jesus comes again a second time to separate the wheat from the chaff.

There should be a deep desire and longing in all our hearts for this day when peace and justice will reign in the world, for this day when all violence ceases and all are treated with the dignity they deserve. This desire should drive us to begin working to bring about God's reign in the world here and now as we wait for His future coming, living out the words that Jesus taught us to pray in the Our Father: "thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." In reflecting on this deep desire for God's peace to reign in the world around us, Pope Paul VI once said, "If you want peace, work for justice."

Pope Paul VI went on to say, "[This] is an invitation which does not ignore the difficulties in practicing Justice, in defining it, first of all, and then in actuating it, for it always demands some sacrifice of prestige and self-interest: perhaps more greatness of soul is needed for yielding to the ways of Justice and Peace than for fighting and imposing on an adversary's rights, whether true or alleged."

What he is saying is that peace can only exist in our world when true justice is realized and the rights of every human being are defended. And yet, this cannot be an empty justice where we impose our wills on others so that we can live out our own every whim and desire. This in the end will not lead to peace but only further injustice. Rather, true justice is only achieved when we sacrifice and submit ourselves to objective truth, the truth taught to us by God Himself, so that human dignity is allowed to fully flourish and the rights of all are respected.

Advent is a beautiful time for us to reflect on how we can try to concretely live out this call to "work for justice" as we seek to prepare the way of the Lord in our lives. This calling begins when we first repent from our own personal sinfulness,

turning away from selfishness to focus on serving the needs of those around us. As we heard today in Paul's Letter to the Romans, our faith is manifested most clearly when we strive to live in harmony and peace with one another.

As we let go of the biases and prejudices in our own lives to look at those around us in love, we will slowly begin to recognize the many injustices in this world which need to be overcome so that the human dignity of everyone we encounter is respected. As Pope Paul VI challenged us, we must begin to "work" to overcome these injustices so that God's peace might reign in this world. This means that we must actively work so that all life is protected from conception until natural death, working against abortion and euthanasia and physician assisted suicide and capital punishment. This means that we must work to end the scourge of racism and sexism. This means that we must work for true immigration reform that balances a nation's right to protect its borders with the need to provide legal ways for others to seek freedom and security. This means that we must work so that our nation's resources are used to care for those among us who are poor and sick. This means that we must work to protect our natural environment. The list of injustices which must be overcome goes on and on.

We cannot overcome all of these societal ills on our own, but with God's strength perhaps we can overcome some of them. There was a time when evils like slavery seemed impossible to overcome, and yet they were overcome when people of faith and good will came together to oppose them. We too must turn in trust to the Lord and seek to prepare His way, turning away from sin and work together to bring about justice in this world so that we might gain a foretaste of the promised Kingdom of Peace as we wait for our Lord to return in glory.