

December could be described as a season of welcome. We welcome family home for Christmas, we greet visitors who have traveled far, and we embrace the season's traditions within our homes. Welcome is woven into the fabric of this time of year. But today's readings invite us to go far deeper than simple human courtesy. They reveal that the Christian spirit of receiving others begins in the very heart of God and always leads toward conversion, healing, and communion. For God above all is the One who welcomes us into renewal, drawing us toward a fuller life and a greater capacity for love.

In the second reading, St. Paul gives a striking command: "Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you." It means much more than offering someone a place at the table. It means to draw someone into your life, to admit them into your heart, to receive them into fellowship and belonging. Paul is calling the Christian community to extend to one another the very welcome Christ extends to sinners: a welcome that draws us into relationship, into communion, into transformation.

That is exactly the kind of welcome John the Baptist offers in today's Gospel. It may seem odd to call John "welcoming"—especially with camel hair clothing, an austere diet, and a message that begins with the word "Repent!" But biblically speaking, John is profoundly welcoming. He receives anyone who comes—Pharisees and Sadducees, tax collectors, soldiers, and ordinary sinners. His welcome is not sentimental, but rather it draws people into a place of transformation for new possibilities for their lives. John's welcome is prophetic. He welcomes everyone on behalf of the One who is coming. He invites them into a community that begins not with comfort but with conversion. John the Baptist is welcoming others as Christ

will welcome them—by opening a pathway that leads to repentance, mercy, and a new way of life.

We sometimes equate conversation and repentance, as if they were the same thing. “I have already converted; I’m Christian. Why do I need to repent?” Bishop Daniel Mueggenborg offers a helpful distinction between conversion and repentance. He writes that conversion is the moment when a person’s life is turned toward God, when we willingly refocus ourselves on the Lord and choose His direction. Repentance is the *ongoing* process of being conformed more to Christ—step by step, decision by decision, action by action. Conversion is the turning; repentance is the walking. Conversion is the “yes” of the heart; repentance is the daily movement that makes that “yes” real. We think of repentance in negative terms, of “giving up” something that is bad for us. On the contrary, repentance is a deeply positive process. God’s goal for us by calling us to repentance is to bring us to deeper communion with the Lord both in how we think and in what we do.[1] Ongoing repentance is both necessary and possible in our lives because of God’s divine welcome.

This is why the message of John the Baptist was attractive. People were drawn to him—not because of his appearance, which was wild and probably unsettling—but because his message rang with authenticity, urgency, and hope. In his voice they heard God’s invitation not to condemnation, but to possibility. John’s call to repent was compelling because people sensed it was not a rejection of them; it was a welcome—an invitation into God’s new future.

Isaiah gives us the vision that makes all this possible. He prophesies the coming of the Messiah. Jesus is the new David, who rules not by force but through the Holy Spirit, forming us

into a people who obey Christ our King out of love. Jesus is the new Adam, restoring the paradise of Eden through the Eucharist and the waters of baptism. Jesus is the new Moses, leading us out of slavery to sin into the freedom of the children of God.

This is the One whose way John the Baptist prepares. This is the One whose welcome transforms every life He touches.[2]

And here is the heart of the matter: God's call to conversion and ongoing repentance is deeply attractive precisely because it is an invitation to become who we were created to be. It promises a life that is more whole, more joyful, more honest, more free. It speaks to the deepest desires of the human heart: to be healed, to be forgiven, to be in communion with God and with one another.

That is why people flocked to the desert. That is why Paul urges us to welcome one another as Christ welcomed us. And that is why Advent is a season not only of waiting, but of holy welcoming: welcoming Christ into our hearts, welcoming His transforming grace into our habits and choices, and welcoming others into the life of God that is being born among us.

This Advent, what kind of welcome is God inviting me to make? What grace do I need in order to receive Christ more fully—both when He comes to me in the quiet grace of Christmas and in His final return in glory? May this be the season when God's welcome opens the path in every one of our lives to conversion, healing, and communion, so that when Christ comes, we will be found ready, joyful, and truly at home in His kingdom.

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[1] See Daniel H. Mueggenborg, *Come Follow Me: Discipleship Reflections on the Sunday Gospel Readings for Liturgical Year A*, 2nd ed. (Herefordshire, UK: Gracewing, 2016), 7–8.

[2] See John Bergsma, *The Word of the Lord: Reflections on the Sunday Mass Readings for Year A* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2022), 16.