

ARE YOU A FAN OF THE GOOD NEWS OR SAD NEWS CLUB?

I have a special bond with Pope Francis not just because he is our present Pope, but because of the profound impact he has made in my spiritual life and my outlook in life.

While growing up in Nigeria and throughout my youthful years, homilies about Hell Fire, how God is annoyed with me due to my sins and how going to heaven would be very difficult, were mainly the homilies I heard in my parish and the seminary. Due to that, I grew up with an Image of God that was not healthy. Although I said my prayers and tried my best to be a good boy, I always related to God from a position of fear. I tried my best to avoid committing sin not because I love God, but because I was so afraid of going to hell fire. Nigeria was tough enough that I did not want to suffer on earth and end up suffering in heaven. Because of the fear I had for God, I never allowed for any personal encounter with him. Why? I just could not wrap my head around the fact that the God I prayed to and worshipped, was the God of Thunder and Lightning, who seemingly took delight in punishing people to the point of sending them to Hell to justify His wrath. This was a battle I grappled with throughout my early years until 2013 when Pope Francis was elected Pope. The first thing about Pope Francis that drew me to him was his simplicity and the fact he was not keeping to tradition for the sake of it. Before long, he centred his papal homilies and teachings on a different type of God that I had not heard – THE GOD OF MERCY. As if he read my mind and knew all my spiritual struggles at the time, on 11th April 2015, Pope Francis announced The Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy with the Bull – *Misericordiae Vultus*. While announcing that Jubilee Year on Mercy, Pope Francis said: “Jesus Christ is the face of the Father’s mercy... We need constantly to contemplate the mystery of mercy. It is a wellspring of joy, serenity, and peace. Our salvation depends on it. Mercy: the word reveals the very mystery of the Most Holy Trinity. Mercy: the ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us... Mercy: the bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to the hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness.” I was at the house of my aunt and her husband (Ada & Andrew), and we were watching EWTN as Pope Francis pronounced the above words. I was struck personally and at the core of my being. It seemed as if Pope Francis was looking into my soul and speaking to me. It seemed as if he knew all my past spiritual struggles and frustration with God. It seemed as if he knew I was lost and needed to be pulled back to God. That speech, and all the spiritual activities of that Extraordinary Jubilee on Mercy, changed my entire knowledge, perception, and approach to God. It dawned on me that there is a truer and nobler Image of God – That of Mercy and Compassion, whose message to us is always Good News, not Bad News, not Evil News and certainly not Sad News. It is that message of God that we are presented with in our Sunday readings this week.

In our Gospel pericope from Mark Chapter 1, we hear – “The beginning of the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” The Greek word used there for Good News is *Euangelion*. The word *Euangelion* means, quite literally, Good News of the highest order. In the Greco-Roman world this term was used to describe or announce an event of significance, like the rise of a new ruler to the throne or a major military victory. The word is used 76 times in the New Testament, and it is from it we get the English words

– Evangelise, and Evangelisation. Yes, everything about God and His messages to us are Good News and nothing more. It is this same Good News that we encounter in today's First Reading from Prophet Isaiah Chapter 40. This Sunday's First Reading comes from that part of the prophecy of Isaiah called **Deutero-Isaiah**. According to biblical scholars, **Deutero-Isaiah** was written around 6th Century BC while the Israelites were in exile in Babylon and in great anguish. Amidst their sufferings, God manifested His Mercy and Compassion to them by sending Prophet Isaiah to console them by speaking to their hearts and assuring them that their time of service is ended, their sins have been atoned for and their time of exile is completed. However, for the Israelites to receive and delight in this Good News, they needed to make space in their hearts for it. Although this would be a tough undertaking akin to making a straight highway in the desert, which we know is almost impossible but doable to some extent; that is the only prerequisite for this Good News to endure. In today's Gospel, John the Baptist gives a name to this tough preparation which is demanded of and from all of us – *Metanoia* – which is a total change of mind and direction. Yes, we all need a change of mind and direction, and this takes time to come about. This is why our God is always patient with us and gives us all the time we need to make the needed change, because He does not want anyone to be lost, but for everyone to be brought to change their ways as St Peter reminds us in today's Second Reading from 2Peter Chapter 3.

My friends, there are 3 Key Questions I would like us to reflect on today:

1. **When was the last time you and I heard the Good News in our lives and in our parish?** In our world where every news on TV, Radio, Internet is about wars, abuse and corruption of all kinds and the condemnation of others; when was the last time we heard News that uplifted our minds and made us dance for joy? According to recent scientific research, the biggest killers of people in the developed world are Loneliness and Depression.
2. **When was the last time you and I brought Good News to others?** I do not know about you; however, there are some people I have encountered who are card-carrying members of the SAD NEWS CLUB! All they do every time is to complain and moan about how bad the world and others are. When we meet people like that, we should try our best to bring them the Good News instead of leading them more into Sad and Bad News.
3. **There is one yardstick for measuring the 'Real Gospel of Jesus Christ' – IT IS ALWAYS GOOD NEWS!** Everything about God is Good News even when it accuses us of our sins and weaknesses; it does not fail to point us to the Good News therein. Let us resist all the Prophets of Sad/Bad/Evil News.

Like Pope Francis who led me to the God of Mercy, may we lead everyone we meet to the Good News of Hope during this Season of Advent. **MARANATHA!!!**

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Homily for the 2nd Sunday of Advent, Year B (10/12/2023)