

*“Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths!”* John the Baptist was sent by God to prepare the way for Jesus through conferring on those who would listen a baptism for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus, even though he was without sin, sought out baptism for the sake of all righteousness. Jesus taught Nicodemus, a teacher of Israel, that, “... *no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and spirit.*” Jesus also taught his own disciples to baptize, although he himself did not baptize, and after his resurrection his final commandment to the Apostles was “*Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.*” Clearly Baptism is important, but just what is it about baptism that makes it important?

Baptism is important because baptism prepares our hearts not only to receive God, but also to respond to God. Baptism confers new life upon us, the life of the Holy Spirit dwelling within us and it is this life that opens our hearts to hear and our minds to comprehend the words of Christ. Baptism makes us new creatures in Christ, adopted sons and daughters of God capable of receiving and living sanctifying grace, the grace that makes us Holy, the grace of justification. It is this grace that God freely gives us at our baptism and it is this grace that enables us to believe in him, to hope in him, and to love him. But baptism is only the beginning, the preparation for the journey that we must make through the wilderness of this world in order to arrive at our true home in heaven. We must still undertake the hard work of this spiritual journey.

John the Baptist spoke of ‘ways to be made straight’, ‘mountains and hills to be laid low’ and ‘valleys to be filled’ so that all men could ‘see the salvation of God’. The ‘ways to be made straight’ are the crooked paths of secular humanistic philosophies that fail to grasp the most basic and fundamental truth about man, that

man was created for God. These are the paths of twisted, convoluted, self-serving rationalizations that men use to justify their immoral behaviors and actions, which deep in their hearts they know are corrupt. The ‘mountains’ and ‘hills’ to be laid low are the justifications that we use so that we might choose sin by suppressing our conscience, the voice of God speaking to us from deep within our souls, a voice that was planted in us at our baptism. The ‘valleys to be filled’ are those moral gaps in our lives between the faith we profess with our lips and the daily lives we actually live. We must fill in these empty valleys of our earthly desires with the fruitful spiritual soil of faith and a lived devotion; we must lay low the mountains of our pride through spiritual humility and humbleness.

Making straight the way of the Lord is about knowing God, not as we want him to be, but as he really is. A simple intellectual knowledge of Christ and his Gospel is not enough to keep us on the difficult and narrow path that leads to heaven. The knowledge that we need is heart knowledge, not intellectual knowledge; knowledge of God’s ways, not knowledge of man’s ways; knowledge that confers action, not passivity. Believing in Christ means following Christ, living as he lived, doing as he did, loving as he loved, and if necessary, dying as he died. The Gospel of Christ is a message of hope for every person on earth regardless of sex, age, culture, class, or state in life and it is a message that must be proclaimed lovingly but boldly and courageously in every circumstance and situation of life.

In a certain way our Baptism can be thought of as an Advent sacrament, one that anticipates the coming of the lord into our hearts by bestowing on us the gift of grace. And so it is appropriate that we should begin this Advent Season by taking time out from the spiritual wasteland of the world and refocusing our attention on those things that really matter, our baptismal promises to God and the truths of our

faith. Let us all use this time of Advent as a time of genuine spiritual renewal, a time to make straight the ways of the Lord by preparing our hearts once again to receive the Christ child, our Lord and Savior, into the temples of our souls. May Mary Most Holy, the Virgin of the Advent, guide us and help us to be docile, as she was docile, to the divine Word of God implanted in our hearts at our baptism and may her fiat, 'let it be done to me according to thy word', become the watchword of our lives so that we may courageously proclaim the Gospel by boldly living the Gospel.