

A dozen or so years ago, I studied Chinese at the Defense Language Institute. It's a beautiful place, sitting on an elevation above Monterey Bay, and above the city of Monterey.

Being a military school, aside from the rudiments of the Chinese language, we studied a lot of terminology that was appropriate to the military. I had thumbed through the textbook, and was very happy to see a chapter on religion. Even though it wasn't a large chapter, I was looking forward to learning some vocabulary related to faith and religion.

At the school, all of our teachers were from China. Some from Taiwan and others from the mainland. One of our younger teachers we called as "little red." She wasn't short. And she didn't have red hair. But she was prone to make statements like: "you put too much emphasis on freedom ... you may have freedom, but in China we don't have crime."

It was obvious to most of us a lot of her observations were heavily flavored by years of growing up in a communist country.

So, the day arrived, and in walks "little red" to be our teacher. We went through the vocabulary, and when we had finished she said: "Now we will have a debate."

The topic of the debate, she announced, was to discuss the "uselessness of religion and of God." She asked who wanted to argue for the "uselessness of religion," and a young woman raised her hand. Out of a class of about a dozen, there was only one. She assigned her as the leader of that side, and asked who wanted to argue against the "uselessness of religion." I looked to the two senior officers, and assumed that one of them (both of them were Catholic), should take the lead.

The Major spoke up: "Jenuwine will lead us." Next thing I know, I'm 'in charge' of two officers.

The argument "for uselessness" was that we were seeking nothing more than 'comfort.' As if our Faith were nothing more than a cup of hot cocoa on a cold day.

Our argument "against uselessness" was that our Faith required us to do things that the world and most of society saw as 'inconvenient.' We talked about our personal sacrifices, and how living a life of Faith required deep personal commitment and many deep personal changes that were far from easy.

Toward the end, our opponents had little to say in rebuttal to our arguments. The teacher was silent until we asked her, "Who won?" Class ended with the teacher proclaiming that "I guess it was a tie."

In the Second Letter of St. Peter, our second reading today, the author addresses the issues of perseverance. The people were becoming impatient – some of them had expected Jesus to return and establish His kingdom in their lifetimes. And much like our

own world, there was a desire for some sort of “return on investment.” Many must have thought that if they weren’t going to get anything for their Faith or the practice of their Faith ... well, that sounded sort of “useless.”

The letter urges them, and us as well, to persevere in our Faith. To persevere in virtue – “in holiness and devotion” as we hear in the reading.

The first reading, from Isaiah, speaks of giving comfort to God’s people. This is spoken to people in exile. Far from home, and wondering what has become of their home and will they ever see it.

This isn’t an easy ‘comfort.’ This is hard. God is asking for perseverance – sometimes translated as ‘long-suffering.’

The prophet goes on to speak of the future coming of God, and a voice – another prophet – calling out to prepare the way for the Lord.

In the Gospel, we meet this voice – this man – in the person of John the Baptist. Who two thousand years ago preached a baptism of repentance. The Greek word here is “metanoia” which means “a change of mind.” But even more than that, “a change of spirit.”

For us today, we too are called to repentance, that is, to change our minds. In what ways have we given up on God? Where do we find our Faith to be “useless?” We all have places in our lives where we would rather do things ourselves.

Yet God is calling us to change that. God is calling us to let Him into our lives – all of our lives. God desires that we let him into everything.

So, this week, let us reflect on where we may have shut God out.

Let us examine our lives and find the places where we haven’t found God to be “useful.”

And relying on God’s grace, let us ask him to help us open up those places where we haven’t yet let Him in – and invite Him in. So that as we move through this Advent season, we may better prepare ourselves to receive His beloved Son – both at this altar, and “soon” at Christmas.

Let us ask for the grace to allow God to be “useful” in our lives – in all places and all things.

Let us pray for the grace so we might have the courage to “change our spirit” so that we can receive the true ‘comfort’ that God so much desires to impart on us through the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ by the Gift of the Holy Spirit.