

3rd SUNDAY OF ADVENT – C (December 12, 2021)

This third Sunday of Advent is traditionally known as Gaudete Sunday. “Gaudete” is Latin for ‘joy’, ‘rejoice’—and that is certainly the main idea in our first two readings. The prophet Zephaniah urged the people of God to ‘shout for joy’ and ‘sing joyfully’, while St. Paul urged the Philippians to ‘rejoice in the Lord always.’ One cause of this joy is the fact that our celebration of Jesus’ coming into our world is drawing ever nearer, and our Advent focus now begins to turn to Bethlehem. It’s also why we now light the pink candle on our Advent wreath.

Luke’s gospel gives us another important focus for getting ready to welcome the Lord Jesus. John the Baptist is the center of attention in this passage, the one whose first and foremost task was to prepare the world for the coming of the Messiah as we heard last Sunday. That preparation involved reminding the people of God of their need for repentance and conversion—the call to change oneself. In the verse immediately before today’s passage from Luke, John warned the people: “every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” The Baptist was hardly the first century’s version of ‘politically correct’—he didn’t mince his words at all.

And did you notice the people’s reaction to this very direct, ‘lay it on the line’ preaching of John? They didn’t get all defensive; they didn’t complain about being offended or accuse him of ‘intolerance’; they didn’t go off to some ‘safe space’ as happens all too often today. No—John’s words obviously hit home in his listeners, and one group after another asked him “what should we do?” Tax collectors, soldiers, everyone asked the same question—they knew John was right, that they needed to change their ways.

John’s response to those ‘what should we do?’ questions is also instructive. He didn’t give them any vague, generic answer like “just be nice”; instead, he got very specific:

--“whoever has two cloaks should share with the person who has none; whoever has food should do likewise”;

--to the tax collectors: “stop collecting more than what is prescribed”;

--to the soldiers: “do not practice extortion, do not falsely accuse anyone, and be satisfied with your wages”.

In other words, John challenged them to turn away from the specific sins and injustices of which they were guilty. If the crowds were sincere in their response to John’s preaching, then they needed to do something directly, to ‘walk the walk’ as the current saying goes. And the time for that change, that conversion was now and not in some indefinite future when the resolve to change for the better, to be converted, may well disappear once again into complacency and going back to being stuck in the spiritual and moral mud.

What if John the Baptist was with us today as he was to the Jews 2000 years ago? What if he were here telling us that Jesus was coming again and that it would be soon? Imagine yourself as one of the crowd hearing John; imagine his words prodding your own conscience...and you ask “what should we do; what should I do?” I think John would be just as direct and just as specific to us today as he was to the tax collectors and soldiers and others back then. The details would

change, of course, because our 21st century world is so different; to us he might say something like:

--‘stop spending so much time watching TV or on your computer or smartphone, when at least some of that time could be better spent with your spouse, child, parent, friend who really needs your physical presence and attention’;

--‘stop using pornography, whether in print or online, because it’s totally degrading and an offense against the God-given dignity, goodness, and purpose of the human body’;

--“get rid of the gossip, the backbiting, the judging; stop looking down on others just because they speak a different language, have a different color or skin, or vote differently than you do.”

These are just a few examples, but you get the idea: it’s not enough to say “I want to turn away from sin”. Instead, we need to get specific: “I reject this sin, I need to say ‘no’ to this temptation that I say ‘yes’ to far too often.” Here is an Advent suggestion/challenge for every single one of us (myself included) that is actually appropriate any time of year: think of the one or two temptations to which I am most prone...and be specific. Now think to yourself: what is it that keeps me from saying ‘no’ to those temptations? Is it pride—“I will determine what’s right or wrong for me”? Could it be that I just don’t want to stop indulging myself in ways that I know in my heart of hearts are not good for me, that are not what Jesus wants of me? St. Augustine, that great saint and doctor of the Church from the fourth century, had a serious struggle against lust in his younger years. He knew that giving in to those temptations was wrong, but for a long time he didn’t want to give it up; in fact, he prayed at one point “Lord, make me chaste...but not yet.” It wasn’t until he read from St. Paul’s letter to the Romans: “put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the desires of the flesh” (Rom. 13:14). He needed to see those specific words addressing his particular sin in order to make the move toward conversion that he needed.

I have to think that the tax collectors and soldiers really did know what they needed to change in themselves, just as St. Augustine knew what he needed to change. But it took the specific words and advice from John the Baptist or, in the case of Augustine, words from scripture to prompt the decision and the resolve to make the changes they needed to make. I also think that we each know what we need to change in ourselves, but we may not be willing to take that next step. Let’s ask the Holy Spirit: “what should I do?”, and then let’s actually take some quiet time to listen for his answer. Then let’s resolve to follow the Spirit’s prompting and pray for the grace and desire to make those changes that we already know in our heart of hearts God wants us to make.