

Third Sunday Advent "C"

December 15-16, 2018

Readings: Zephaniah 3:14-18; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:10-18

When assigned to a parish with a school, my visits to the Kindergarten classrooms were both delightful and exhausting! I loved the interaction, but was amazed how many questions could be lobbed my way in a five minute times period! It was rapid fire from the moment I entered. Parents know this first hand, but I suspect that John the Baptist could also relate.

In our Gospel, the crowds repeatedly questioned John the Baptist not so as to nag and exhaust him, but because he fascinated them. Someone this odd in appearance, this mysterious, must have something to say. He may just be who he says he is, or perhaps more?

Perhaps one reason for the mystery surrounding John is that he never invited people to adopt his particular mode of life, as did some other charismatic leaders. He neither appears to be starting a new movement, nor, despite radical preaching, is there any hint of attempting to overthrow any power or government.

John's preaching sticks to the basics, a common sense ethics, applicable both to the Jews of his day and equally to later Christians. The themes of equity, honesty and assistance stand out.¹ Though not as explicitly as he does in John's Gospel, John the Baptist distances himself from any claim that he might be the Messiah, instead referring to Jesus as "the just one," "the One who is to come," phrases of distinct Old Testament origin.

John also speaks of power, a sought after quality in every era. John clearly indicates that Jesus is more powerful than himself; he is not even worthy to perform the most menial of tasks, to untie Jesus' sandals. To unfasten the sandal-strap was the duty of a slave, and forbidden in later rabbinical tradition as a service to be done by a disciple for his master.

Far from enjoying his fifteen minutes of fame, John was doing all in his power to avoid it. Though he was pointing beyond himself, he still offered spiritual advice freely.

¹ See (Cf. Rev. Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, I-IX vol. 1, p. 465)

“What should we do?” “Teacher, what should we do?” “And what is it that we should do?” Three times the same basic question is asked. [Two additional times it is asked in chapters 10 and 18 of the same Gospel] And three times the question is answered.

John discerned that some were treating him as the Messiah and it is difficult to fully appreciate the degree to which he must have felt he had failed. His entire goal was to draw attention to the Savior, and look what was happening? So he ramps up his preaching. “His winnowing fan is in his hand to clear his threshing floor...”

A winnowing fan was a fork-like shovel used to fan or toss threshed grain to the wind to separate the light chaff from the heavy kernels, which would fall to the ground in a heap. It is a vivid image of the end times and of the sorting out of human beings according to their deeds and at least, visually speaking, of their worth. Are we no more than as wheat to be tossed to the winds? Or will we be stored up and gathered in the barn?

Do what is just and right. Look to the Savior, I am not he, says John. Treat others with compassion, justice and respect. No mention of fasting, dressing in camel’s hair or anything for which he had become known. His advice also demanded interaction with those who are weak and poor.

In carrying out the challenge of St. John the Baptist, let us recall that the manner in which we live our faith must also show forth its attractiveness. The Gospel is Good News, and as such our lives must reflect. “Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice!” Gaudete means to rejoice. The Church gives us a glimpse of the joy soon to come, as the flowers on the altar and the more festive vestment colors demonstrate. Our kindness should be known to all. If our lives reflect this, it will be in the very acts of charity and goodness that we exhibit towards one another.

Living the life of the Gospel gives peace, a peace that is beyond our every imagining. May that peace reign in our hearts as we prepare our families and ourselves for the joys of Bethlehem, towards which our attention

turns, all the while recognizing the needs of our brothers and sisters who are most in need of Christ's love, the spiritually poor in our midst.

“Shout for joy, O daughter Zion! Sing joyfully, O Israel!” Our Scriptures today are giving us permission, exhortating us to be people of hope, joy, and gladness. Our misfortune has passed by. Our Savior has come to save us. He is drawing closer. Let us make ready the way of the Lord.