

2nd Sunday of Advent

Dec 4, 2022

It's easy to feel bad. And I don't mean just about sad or tragic things that happen to us. I'm talking about the stuff we actually cause, the stuff that makes us feel bad afterward. Not all the time, of course. There are plenty of less-than-honorable things we do that don't seem to bother us too much. We cut someone off in traffic to get out in front of the rest of the cars. We get a little crabby with a clerk in a store - even though the thing we are upset about was certainly not his or her fault. We get a little too vocal toward the refs at our child's game. We fake an illness to get out of school or out of work. I guess you get the idea.

But then there are other things that truly make us feel bad, truly make us wish we had never done what we did. We say some pretty mean things during an argument with our spouse. We make a tasteless and/or hurtful joke at someone else's expense and notice the humiliated look on their face. We start "helping ourselves" to little things from work (supplies, food from the restaurant we work at, etc . . .) and soon find ourselves taking more and more. We neglect visiting our elderly parents - always coming up with some sort of excuse. We forget an important birthday or anniversary. We punish our child for something we find

out later they didn't do. Yes, a lot of bad things we do truly make us feel precisely that same way - bad.

“Produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance.”

So says John the Baptist to the Pharisees and Sadducees in today's Gospel passage from St. Matthew. Harsh words. Most of us would be irritated if someone spoke to us that way. But this was John and, well, he sort of had a reputation for “telling it as it is”. People who came out to see him were not expecting sunshine and rainbows. They wanted to be cleansed, wanted to be freed from whatever they were ashamed of, wanted to be given an opportunity to publicly express their sorrow and regret. People didn't come to John for this ritual bath because they were proud of themselves. Rather, it was the opposite. People came to him because they felt bad about a particular action or pattern of behavior. Some might even have been there because they felt bad about just about everything – about the entire way they had conducted their lives.

But John knew something that maybe many of them didn't - something maybe we need to be reminded of too. You see, John the Baptist knew that what he was providing was simply one step in a two-step process. With John, there was no such thing as cheap forgiveness. Simply “feeling bad” about something wasn't enough. It was

essential, yes - but needed to be accompanied by the more difficult of the two parts - evidence.

In other words - if someone was truly sorry for something they had done, it would show in his or her actions, show in the way someone tried to make the situation right, show in the changes they were willing to make. And that's why he scolded the Pharisees and the Sadducees. He didn't see any evidence (or any fruit) that they were manifesting their regret in concrete ways.

The truth is that our Catholic Church has always known this. In fact, there was a time in the history of the Church when the Sacrament of Penance reflected this truth. It may surprise you to know that there was a time when penitents had to publicly "do their penance" before being readmitted into the faith community, before being "reconciled". Depending on the sins - this could be a difficult and lengthy ordeal. The Church wanted to see "evidence" of repentance, not simply accept someone's "words" as proof.

But we do it differently today, of course. The reason is pretty straightforward. By requiring public penance before being welcomed back into the community, the Church risked misleading the faithful by possibly giving the appearance that people were "earning" God's forgiveness.

We can't ever do that. God never "owes" us anything. And so, today we are forgiven first, and then leave the confessional promising to try to make things right, make amends, produce the good fruit God expects (and maybe even demands).

In a few weeks we will be celebrating Christmas, and once again invite the Lord Jesus into our hearts and minds and souls. We will once again acknowledge just how thankful we are that God became one of us, that God visited his people. And we will also acknowledge just how badly we need our God to be close to us, a God upon whom we are dependent for absolutely every good thing. That's the first step in the miracle of Christmas.

I say first step because Christmas doesn't end there, can't end there, mustn't end there. There is a second step - one that brings the miracle to its fullness. You see, the God we will once again invite in this Christmas, is a God who wants more for us and more from us. And what he wants is to change us - not in just small ways, but in dramatic ways too, transforming us into new creations, into the people he created us to be, visited us to be, and died for us to be.

In other words, he wants "fruit" from us - concrete evidence that we don't take his forgiveness lightly, that we

don't take it for granted, that we don't ever forget how much God loves us. And that evidence is only truly realized in the actual way we live, in the things we do and say, in the way we think, and in the way we see others.

My dear friends in Christ, feeling "bad" isn't enough. It just isn't. Producing good fruit is what matters. So let's make sure the world knows that we mean what we say, that we believe what we profess, and that we want to be better people. God deserves that.