

Third Sunday of Advent

December 15, 2024

“. . . but the chaff he will burn in unquenchable fire.”

Welcome to Joyful Sunday! Today is called “*Gaudete*” Sunday because today’s Mass begins with the opening antiphon, “***Gaudete in Domino semper***” (“*Rejoice in the Lord always*”). Today we light the rose-colored candle of the Advent wreath, and the priest as you see is wearing a rose-colored vestments to express our communal joy in the coming of Jesus as our Savior. We rejoice because a) we are celebrating the day of Christ’s birth, b) we recognize Jesus’ daily presence in our midst, and c) we’re waiting for Christ’s return in glory.

There’s nothing like a little chaff burning in unquenchable fire to lift our spirits. Yet, that’s what we hear every three years when we read this passage from St. Luke. It’s quite a sobering, scary thought, right? How in the world do we “rejoice” when St. Luke just about scared us to death?

Of course, if you were listening carefully, you noticed that both of our first two readings, one from the prophet Zephaniah and the other from St. Paul’s Letter to the Philippians, spoke at length about being joyful. We are invited to “shout for joy” and “exult” and “be glad” and “rejoice” and “have no anxiety at all”. Now that sounds more like it! And we do so, we rejoice, because Christmas is getting closer, our Savior is drawing near. And we wait and hope for something wonderful, rather, for someone wonderful who will change absolutely everything, our loving God who comes to us to reverse the course of history, to set humanity on a new path, to set each of us on a course to a meaningful, God-centered and joyful life. And that’s a cause for celebration.

But then there’s John the Baptist, or in today’s Gospel passage, John the Answer Man. He was used to it, I suppose, he was used to all the questions, all the people asking him if he was the One, the Christ, the Messiah, the One they had been longing for. But in this particular passage

we find him getting three identical questions from various people. It's a simple one, if you consider how short it is. But it was gnawing at the hearts of those who were there to listen to John (and who were also maybe there to undergo the ritual bath he was providing). You see, a good number of them present that day seem to have been wondering to themselves

What should we do?

It's kind of no surprise that this was the question on their minds. After all, they were most likely law-abiding faithful Jews. And as you well know, to be a good Jew was not simply "believing" the right things. It was also about "doing" the right things too. Believing and acting were not separate things. They were intricately linked. And they had over 600 laws to make sure they never divorced one from the other.

John the Baptist doesn't provide them with mind-blowing answers. In fact, he tells them what they should have known all along, things that seem rather obvious. Don't be greedy. Don't cheat. Don't lie. These are the basics and John was all about getting people to recognize their obvious faults, their obvious failings, their obvious sins. "Get back to what you know is right," he could have said to them just as that.

But then there was that other thing, that not-so-obvious thing. And it really wasn't a "thing" at all. It was a person. John described him as "mighty" (although maybe not in the way they expected). And John knew in his heart that this man had a certain kind of authority (from God and not from earthly leaders). And he also knew that this man's judgement was ultimately the only one that really mattered, a moral judgement, a judging of hearts and minds and attitudes and motives. And John felt a responsibility to help people be ready, be prepared to encounter someone whose Spirit could and would change absolutely everything and everyone open to that possibility.

Sometimes we forget that our faith is founded on a person, the God / man Jesus. I don't mean we actually "forget" about Jesus or somehow never think about him or pray to him or anything like that. What I mean is that we sometimes stop trying to "know" this Jesus, stop trying to have an intimate relationship with him, stop trying to imitate him. Rather, our faith can sometimes dwindle to a combination of believing a handful of faith statements and agreeing to refrain from doing a few really bad things.

Yet, what gets lost in all of that is Jesus. He becomes a character in a few stories we know, but over time recedes into the background of our lives. And so, sometimes, instead of trying to see just as Jesus sees, we use our own prescription to view others and the world around us. And instead of trying to adopt the attitudes of Jesus, we simply hang on to whatever attitudes that work for us, somehow convincing ourselves that striving to be like Jesus is a completely unreasonable endeavor. When that happens, no longer do we want to be merciful as Jesus is merciful. No longer do we want to be generous as Jesus is generous. No longer do we want to extend compassion and forgiveness and understanding and every other good thing Jesus was (and is) about. At times, that sounds a lot like me.

What should we do? That was certainly an appropriate question for those who came to the banks of the River Jordan. But for us, for you and me who have pledged our lives to our Lord and Savior, there is a different question we must ask first.

WHO should I be?

And the answer to that question is about to be born in a tiny manger and in every heart open to him. If we have the courage and faith to want Jesus to be re-born in us this Christmas, our loving God will bring that miracle about. And the answer to the question, "What should we do?" will come into focus from our living God within us.