

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Gospel: Luke 3:10-18

And the crowds asked John, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

REFLECTION 1:

WHAT MUST WE DO?

A century ago, Rudyard Kipling, poet and author of *Jungle Book*, penned his famous advice poem 'If'. He says in the poem that if you can talk to the crowd and keep your virtue, or walk with kings and not lose the common touch, then you will truly be a man/woman. Kipling taught that we must be true to ourselves and not let fame or fortune sweep reality aside. Those who suddenly become idols can so easily lose their sense of balance and fall victim to drugs, alcohol and other delusions – they become intoxicated with their own self-importance.

There was one great man 'no greater born of woman' and his name, John the Baptist. He never lost his sense of balance. From the outset he made it clear that he was not the messiah. John explained: 'I am baptising in water, but there is one to come who is mightier than I. I am not fit to loosen his sandal strap. He will baptise you in the Holy Spirit and in fire'.

Today, Gaudete Sunday (Sunday of Joy), we have the message of John to the people and nowhere does the difference between John and Jesus stand out so clearly; whatever the message of John was, it was not gospel. It was not good news; it was news of terror. John had lived in the desert and sometimes a spark set the face of the desert alight and out of the crannies came vipers, scurrying in terror from the menacing flames and it was to them that John likened the people who came to be baptised, 'ye brood of vipers'. The Jews at the time had not the slightest doubt that in God's economy there was a favoured nation clause – they held that God would judge other nations with one standard, and the Jews with another. They held that they were safe from judgement simply by virtue of the fact that they were Jewish – the children of Abraham were exempt from judgement. John told them that racial privilege meant nothing and that one's life not lineage was God's standard of judgement.

There are three outstanding things about John's message. He began by demanding that people should share with one another. His was a social gospel which laid it down that God will never absolve anyone who is content to have too much while others have too little. He ordered people to work out their salvation by doing those jobs as they should be done. Let the tax-collectors be good tax-collectors, let the soldiers be good soldiers. People had a duty to serve God where God had placed them. It was John's conviction that there was nowhere we can serve God better than in our daily work.

Finally John was quite sure that he was only the forerunner, the herald of the messiah. The King was still to come and with him would come judgement. The winnowing fan was a great flat wooden shovel and with it the grain was tossed into the air, the heavy grain fell to the ground while the chaff was blown away. And just as the chaff was segregated from the grain, so the King would separate the good from the bad. John painted a picture of judgement, but it was a judgement which could be met with

confidence, where those who looked after their neighbour were assured that they had done well. John was one of the world's supremely effective speakers. He pleaded for action, soon to be accomplished. He saw life as a reality to be lived.

There's a story told about an old Indian who shared his wisdom about happiness with his grandson. He told the grandson that we have two wolves inside us who struggle with each other. One is the wolf of peace, love and kindness – the other the wolf of fear, greed and hatred. 'Which wolf will win, wise grandfather?' asked the grandson. The wise man gave the John the Baptist answer, 'whichever one we feed'. So, which will we feed? As we celebrate with Advent joy, we pray for that deep happiness that will come from reaching out to others in love and justice, looking towards their needs. The Psalmist today asks the question, 'what will bring us happiness?' and he answers his own question, 'Let the light of God's face shine upon us'.

REFLECTION 2:

'WHAT OUGHT WE TO DO?'

Viktor Frankl was a Jewish psychiatrist when the Nazis arrested him and sent to a concentration camp. In his book 'Man's Search for Meaning' he describes some of the sufferings the Jews enjoyed in those camps. One of these was the pain of waiting - waiting to learn the fate of loved ones, waiting to learn one's own fate, waiting to be rescued. The pain of waiting also plagued Jews in Jesus' day - waiting to be delivered from the Romans, waiting for the Messiah to come. This pain affected Jews in different ways, some for instance lost hope, some lost faith, while others simply watched and prayed.

We can be counted among those who are watching and praying. For us, it's the daily discovery of God in our midst as the clock ticks towards Christmas. Zephaniah in our first reading today speaks of a day when Yahweh (God) would repeal whatever in the past was levelled against us, there would be no more evil to fear, we would exult with joy and renewed by God's life we would in fact 'dance with joy as the day of the festival draws near'.

If we might read between the lines in Paul's letter (Phil. 4: 4-7) he seems to be telling us that life is too short to spend it in needless conflict and concentrate our energies on what really matters in a spirit of gentleness, mercifulness and tolerance. We should not insist on our legal and genuine rights according to the letter of the law, if such insistence would be the cause of strife and bitter discord. Maybe those who exercise pressure on tenants who struggle with rising rents would take heed of Paul's wise counsel or the Baptist's sage advice, 'Exact no more than your rate'.

In the course of his teaching along the banks of the Jordan River John the Baptist attracted converts, ordinary people were moved by his message and asked, 'What ought we to do?' Soldiers wanted to know how they could translate their willingness to change into action asking, 'What about us?' John did not impose harsh measures, he simply directed the energies and the generosity of his questioners towards the routine circumstances of their everyday lives.

Coming up to Christmas, we should think positive. It's so easy to elaborate on the weak points of other people, especially members of our own family. Abbot Michael of Bolton Abbey tells of the wonderful aftermath of a warm welcome he experienced on a visit to another Cistercian monastery. It gave him a sense of well-being that lasted the whole visit. If we are asking before Christmas 'what ought we to do?' - as the Irish proverb might put it, 'Is leor nod don eolach' - a hint is all the wise one needs!