

Third Sunday of Advent C/2012

The readings of this third Sunday of Advent talk about the joy of the return of the Lord. They encourage us to adopt the spiritual attitudes that can make that joy effective within us. They invite us in, particular, to realize that the Lord is closer to us now more than ever.

The first reading of the book of Zephaniah announces the joy of the victory of Israel over its enemies. Israel has to rejoice because God has put an end to its fear and misfortune. He has removed the judgment against his people and turned away his enemies. Therefore, Jerusalem shall not be afraid or discouraged, because God dwells in their midst as a savior.

What is behind this text is the idea that whenever God intervenes, the prospect of defeat disappears. Wherever he is present, he provides an adequate defense that makes the enemies of his people scramble. That is why his people should put their trust in him and love him, as he himself rejoices over them.

This text allows us to understand what is at stake in today's Gospel as John the Baptist prepares the people of Israel to the joy of the coming of the Lord. First of all, the Gospel says that, once the people heard John's teaching over baptism for the repentance of sin, they all asked him what they should do. In his answer, he invited them to act in a practical way by sharing with the needy what they have, by stopping the practice of corruption in their undertaking and by being honest in their jobs.

Then, the Gospel says that, as people were full of expectation about John, they asked him if he was the Christ. In sincerity and humility, John recognized that he was not. He confessed that his job was to baptize with water, but the one who was coming, was mightier than he and capable of baptizing with the Holy Spirit and fire. He also added that he was unworthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals.

Finally, John concluded his exhortation by pointing out that the one who was coming was like a judge. Not only would he have in his hands a winnowing fan, but he will also gather the wheat in his barn and burn the chaff in fire at the appointed time.

What do we learn from this Gospel? The first thing is about the priority of practical actions over mere words. As a matter of fact, as different groups of people went to see John and asked him what they should do, he did not propose to them some sort of spiritual exercises or meditations to perform, but rather a series of concrete acts without which their conversion would mean nothing.

First practical act: sharing with others. This is a word that some people do not really like to hear and for which they have some aversion. In fact, the culture of selfishness in which we have grown up has molded us in such a way that what counts is only my family, my problems, my desires, my joy, etc. With regard to this trend of our culture, Advent is an invitation that we open our home, our heart and our hands to others, especially to the needy.

Second practical act: honesty. This is a word for which many people feel comfortable, because they have done nothing bad to reproach themselves. But, do we really measure the practical consequence of honesty? Who among us has never taken advantage of the poor or the unprotected? How easy do we see only the faults and

mistakes of others and not our own. With regard to this trend of our personality, Advent is an invitation that we act correctly and we treat others as we would like to be treated.

Third practical act: Justice. This is a point on which each one of us has to work hard, because our justice can be corrupted by emotion, passion and interests. With regard to this trend of our personality, Advent is an invitation that we respect the Law and be content with what we possess.

Now, let me make an observation, before I ask a question. If you have paid attention, you would have realized that, as different groups of people came to John for counseling, he did not propose to them to quit their job in order to look for holiness. On the contrary, he wanted them to work out their salvation by doing the right thing within their job. In that sense, our daily job and undertaking become the place of our pursuit of sanctification. We cannot serve God better than in our daily work.

Now let me come to the question I wanted to raise: Why is John the Baptist so concerned with the practical way of life? I believe that John the Baptist wants to draw our attention to the fact that Christian faith has not only a spiritual dimension, but also a material dimension. These two cannot be separated without undermining the integrity of our faith in Jesus. That is why anytime we neglect to care for human needs, we miss the opportunity to live up to the integrity of Christian faith.

The second thing I want to bring is about the importance of humility. In fact, what John the Baptist required of people, he was the first to live it. For instance, he shared the good news with people. He was honest with people by telling them that he was not the Christ, but just his servant, etc.

By doing so, John the Baptist teaches us humility and the recognition of our merits and its limits. Today more than ever, we need people who are humble, especially among those who have various ministries inside the Church. This is an important point, because there is a tendency of boasting a lot because of our gifts, talents and skills. That is why John the Baptist challenges us that we do not appropriate unduly the merits and the glory of our Lord Jesus as though they are ours.

Let us, then, pray that the Lord may help us this Advent to come close to him and to look for our holiness through our daily jobs. Through the example of John the Baptist, may he help us to make room for Him in our lives, in spite of our many gifts and talents! May the Lord bless our undertaking so that we find our joy in finding him in what we do. God bless you all!

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



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