

Third Sunday Advent “C”

December 11-12 2021 | Cathedral of Saint Paul

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

As one who taught in a Catholic school for ten years, I had my share of inquisitive students. Sometimes though, the rapid-fire questions became a bit unbearable. I couldn't keep up with some of the more vocal students! Frankly, I was exasperated!

The crowds asked John the Baptist question after question. To be honest, I suspect their motivation was neither to nag, nor exhaust him. In reality, they were fascinated by this man. Someone this odd in appearance, a man this mysterious—he must have something to say. He may just be who he says he is, or could he be more? Another question.

One reason for the mystery surrounding John is that he never invited people to adopt his mode of life, as did many charismatic leaders. He was starting no new movement, and while his preaching was radical, he gave no indication of attempting to overthrow any power or government. He even says at one point, “Be satisfied with your wages,” without even a hint that there may in fact be the possibility of an unjust wage.

Instead, John stuck to basic, common-sense ethics, applicable to the people of his day. The themes of equity, honesty and assistance are paramount here. They are further evidence of the good fruit expected of his community. Though not as explicitly as he does in John's Gospel, John the Baptist distanced himself from any claim that he might be the Messiah. He refers to Jesus as “the just one,” “the One who is to come,” both phrases of distinct Old Testament background.¹

He also makes use of a distinct image to any human being, that of power. Power was, and is always an issue, always sought and desired. But Jesus is more powerful than I, says John, so much so that I am not even worthy to

¹ Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke*, vol. 1, p. 465

perform the most menial of tasks, to untie his sandals. To unfasten the sandal-strap was the task of a slave, forbidden by the rabbis in later rabbinical tradition as a service to be done by a disciple for his master.

The image that John uses only highlights the Baptizer's own lowliness in comparison to Jesus. To be colloquial, John was not drinking in his fifteen minutes of fame; rather, he was doing all in his power to avoid it.

The fact that he was pointing beyond himself does not prevent him from meting out spiritual advice and answering questions. Perhaps the preponderance of questions may have even begun to make him re-think the situation. "Are these people asking me how to prepare for the Messiah, or are they asking me questions as they would a Messiah?" What is going on here?

John discerned that in fact he was being treated 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 decides to be even clearer. **"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 visually at least- of their worth. How much more powerful is the one who accomplishes this feat with human lives? Are we no more than as wheat to be tossed to the winds? Will we be stored up and gathered in the barn?

"What should we do?" "Teacher, what should we do?" "And what is it that we should do?" Three times the same question is asked. Three times it is answered. Do what is just and right. Look to the Savior, I am not he. Treat others with compassion, justice and respect. He does not exhort them to fast, to dress in camel's hair or any of the things he had become

known for. His admonitions were eminently practical, and yet demand interaction through an encounter with those who are weak and poor.

In carrying out the challenge of St. John the Baptist, let us remember that the way we live the faith can also show forth its beauty. Recall, the Gospel is Good News, and as such our lives must bear a resemblance to that fact. “Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice!” Gaudete- rejoice. Our kindness should be known to all.

If our lives are going to bear this out, it will do so in the very acts of charity and goodness we exhibit towards one another. Living the radical life of the Gospel brings 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, all the while recognizing the needs of the spiritually poor in our midst.

“Shout for joy, O daughter Zion! Sing joyfully, O Israel!” Our Scriptures give us the permission- even the exhortation- to be people of hope, joy, and gladness. Why? Because our misfortune is over-our Savior has come to save us. He is almost here. Let us make ready the way of the Lord.