

The Third Week of Advent
December 11, 2016

We tend to think that the trial of Jesus happened only at the end of his life when he was brought in front of Herod and Pilate. But if we really pay close attention to what happens through most of the gospels, Jesus was on trial for the entirety of his earthly mission. Every time he did or said something it raised questions from "Who does he think he is?" to "Is this the one to come?"

One's response to those questions depended on two basic sources for discernment: the religious tradition of Israel (think Pharisees and Sadducees) or the openness of each individual to accept or reject the challenge of Jesus' person and message.

Just as it is today, in the days of John the Baptist sacred scripture could be read and interpreted in many ways. There has always been a strong temptation to choose a particular scripture to prove one's point of view. We see that in today's Gospel.

John had appeared on the scene predicting that the one to come would arrive with axe and torch in hand to cut down and burn the rotten wood of Israel.

But after John had been arrested for his prophetic activities and for condemning Herod's marriage to his sister-in-law, his disciples told him how Jesus was going around preaching an entirely different message.

We can only imagine how difficult this must have been for John. He probably didn't worry too much about his own life; after all, he knew he was putting his head on the block when he spoke out against Herod. But he had to be very concerned about his mission and message. Was Jesus really the one he had been called to herald? If so, where was the action? Where was the fire?

That's why John sent his disciples to ask Jesus: "Are you the one who is to come or should we look for another?"

Now, Jesus tended to avoid those kinds of questions because they were too tied up with each person's idea of what a messiah was or should be. So Jesus did what he always did, he turned the question around to get to what really mattered. He told John's disciples to look at what they had seen and heard in his presence: He told them, "Judge for yourselves. What kind of activity really demonstrates God's presence?"

John had been described as a model of strict asceticism. Nobody questioned his integrity, but few people, even if they looked forward to the apocalypse he predicted, wanted to live exactly as he did.

His lifestyle of fasting and abstinence was harsh because it reflected his concept of God. Jesus, on the other hand, was criticized for eating and drinking, for spending time with the wrong kind of people. And that mirrored *his* experience of God.

It's no surprise then, that John's primary sacrament was a baptism of repentance while Jesus' was more like a communion feast.

So when John's disciples came to Jesus, their ears were still ringing with John's favorite selections from the prophets that focused on sin and punishment. But Jesus, steeped in the very same prophets, drew the good news from the prophets so that he preached and demonstrated God's offer of salvation.

So in responding to John's disciples, Jesus wanted them to focus on the transformative nature of his encounters with people: the blind saw, the deaf could hear. Everywhere Jesus went people were restored to the fullness of their humanity fulfilling the true prophetic vision of the Messiah.

Jesus must have loved his cousin very much and he wanted John to be at peace as he entered his final trial knowing with confidence that together, he and Jesus had fulfilled all that the Father had asked of them.

The Third Sunday of Advent is called *Gaudete* Sunday because it is a time to rejoice in who God really is. Not who we think he is or who we want him to be.

Today's celebration asks us to judge our faith in the light of Jesus' message and life. Are we waiting for the destruction of our evil enemies or do we long for the transformation of sinners - including ourselves?

Many in today's world seem way too eager for the first option. The second option though, is much costlier. Because it requires real love to hope for the transforming salvation of those who have hurt us, and it requires humble courage to look for our own conversion.

Gaudete Sunday invites us to rejoice in all that is good around us. It challenges us to recognize the presence of God in everything that promotes freedom and communion.

And the more we participate in Jesus' work of transformation through mercy, compassion and forgiveness, the more we will understand that we have encountered Emmanuel - God with us - and we won't need to look for any other path towards reassurance and strength when fear or doubt invades our hearts and clouds our minds.