

The Second Sunday of Advent

December 4, 2016

If the key phrase for the First Sunday of Advent is “stay awake”, then the key phrase for this, the Second Sunday of Advent is “be prepared”. Today we are introduced to one of the great characters of Advent, John the Baptist.

Now most of us know that the sentimentality of this season can be overwhelmingly soft and warm. It’s a time of nice smells, and heart-felt music, and gentle images of softly falling snow and manger scenes complete with angels and shepherds and all kinds of animals.

Even in the secular world, chestnuts are roasting on open fires, good people all over the world are singing “Let it snow” in an almost perpetual loop, and jingle bells and silver bells keep ringing over and over again. It may drive some people nuts, but it is an attempt at maintaining a warm and inviting atmosphere as the world gets to be so dark.

But it’s not just the secular culture’s temptation. Even religious types and orthodox liturgies can get kind of soft and mellow at this time of the year. Some are anticipating a little baby about to be born again. Some sing of a time of universal justice and peace for all.

Some, like Isaiah in today’s first reading, sing beautifully and convincingly of a coming reign of gentleness where the lion will lie down with the kid, and the wolf will live with the lamb. Isaiah tells us again today that the time is coming soon when God’s holy mountain will contain a civilization wherein there will be no harm or destruction, and where all the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord.

It’s a beautiful image and a very touching dream. But haven’t you ever asked yourself the question “Where is that world?” Where is that mountain? Where is Jimmy Stewart in “It’s a Wonderful Life” really alive *today*? Where is the reign of justice? We’ve proclaimed them and sung about it for centuries.

Why do so few of us realize them? Well, today's liturgy offers an important hint, and it comes in the person of John the Baptist.

John comes crashing onto the scene and he represents the remedy to all those questions and his story must never be mistaken for mere spiritual melodrama. John is the perfect contrast to anything soft or sentimental in the holiday season.

John's message is very clear that there are two ways that we can live out our faith: We can live it passively, or we can live it personally.

Take for example the Pharisees and Sadducees in today's Gospel passage. Everyone looked up to them. They looked up to themselves. And why not? They were the religious and social leaders in Israel. They were the most visible and active members of the Temple. They knew what to do when they went to Church, they knew all the prayers and on the surface, they appeared to be models of religion.

They placed their confidence in being "children of Abraham." In other words, culturally speaking, they were good Jews. They came from good Jewish families and followed all of the Jewish customs.

But John the Baptist warns them that being cultural Jews wasn't enough. "God can raise up children of Abraham from these stones," he said. You see, their religion was only on the surface: it didn't touch their hearts.

We are frequently tempted to make the same mistake.

Little by little, become self-satisfied just because we come to Mass, receive the sacraments, go to Catholic schools... We can become complacent because we look like model Catholics on the outside, perhaps we've fallen into becoming merely cultural Catholics. When we live our faith passively, we're a lot like artificial plants: we look nice, but we bear no fruit.

If we're to be prepared for the coming of Jesus as John speaks about, we have to go beyond the appearance of being Catholic. John challenges us to re-examine how we live out our faith.

This examination should inspire each one of us to be active, dedicated, energetic followers of Jesus Christ. And that means getting to know him deeply and to love him passionately by striving to build up his Kingdom by becoming authentic disciples.

"Stay awake," we heard last week. "Prepare and repent," we hear this week because Jesus is coming.

Unfortunately, repentance is usually only on our own terms. We find it hard to detach ourselves from habits and attitudes that are unworthy of us and hurtful to others. Like St. Augustine, we're inclined to say, "Change me, Lord...but not yet." That kind of hesitation is unfortunate because an unqualified reception of the Lord will provide far more happiness and peace than all the objects of our material or sinful attachments.

Today's gospel urges us to be prepared for the Lord's coming by making room in our hearts for the love of God. The Eucharist reminds us every Sunday that God loves us and has given his only Son to die for us. This means that we are very precious in God's sight.

It also means that God is more than ready to enter our hearts and to lead us to true repentance.

The readiness of the Lord to become our best friend is true at all times, but never more so than in the season of Advent.