

GOSPEL

Luke 3:10–18

When all the people asked John, ‘What must we do?’ he answered, ‘If anyone has two tunics he must share with the man who has none, and the one with something to eat must do the same.’ There were tax collectors too who came for baptism, and these said to him, ‘Master, what must we do?’ He said to them, ‘Exact no more than your rate.’ Some soldiers asked him in their turn, ‘What about us? What must we do?’ He said to them, ‘No intimidation! No extortion! Be content with your pay!’

A feeling of expectancy had grown among the people, who were beginning to think that John might be the Christ, so John declared before them all, ‘I baptise you with water, but someone is coming, someone who is more powerful than I am, and I am not fit to undo the strap of his sandals; he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fan is in his hand to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his barn; but the chaff he will burn in a fire that will never go out.’ As well as this, there were many other things he said to exhort the people and to announce the Good News to them.

A REFLECTION BY POPE FRANCIS

13 December 2015

In today’s Gospel, there is a question posed three times: “What shall we do?” (Lk 3:10, 12, 14). It is raised to John the Baptist by three categories of people: First, the crowd in general; second, the publicans or tax collectors; and, third, some soldiers. Each of these groups questions the prophet on what must be done to implement the conversion that he is preaching. John’s reply to the question of the crowd is sharing essential goods. He told the first group, the crowd, to share basic necessities, and therefore says: “He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise” (v. 11). Then, he tells the second group, the tax collectors, to collect no more than the amount owed. What does this mean? No taking ‘bribes’, John the Baptist is clear. And he tells the third group, the soldiers, not to extort anything from anyone and to be content with their wages (cf. v. 14). There are three answers to the three questions

of these groups. Three answers for an identical path of repentance, which is manifested in concrete commitments to justice and solidarity. It is the path that Jesus points to in all his preaching: the path of diligent love for neighbour.

From John the Baptist’s admonitions, we understand the general tendencies of those who at that time held power, in various forms. Things have not changed very much. However, no category of people is excluded from following the path of repentance to obtain salvation, not even the tax collectors, considered sinners by definition: not even they are excluded from salvation. God does not preclude anyone from the opportunity to be saved. He is — so to speak — anxious to show mercy, to show it towards everyone, and to welcome each one into the tender embrace of reconciliation and forgiveness.

We feel that this question — “What shall we do?” — is ours also. Today’s liturgy tells us, in the words of John, that it is necessary to repent, to change direction and take the path of justice, solidarity, sobriety: these are the essential values of a fully human and genuinely Christian life. Repent! It sums up the message of the Baptist. And the Liturgy of this Third Sunday of Advent helps us to rediscover a special dimension of repentance: joy. Whoever repents and approaches the Lord, feels joy. The prophet Zephaniah says to us today: “Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion!”, addressing Jerusalem (Zeph 3:14); and the apostle Paul exhorts the Christians of Philippi: “Rejoice in the Lord always” (Phil 4:4). Today, it takes courage to speak of joy, which, above all, requires faith! The world is beset by many problems, the future is burdened by uncertainties and fears. Yet, Christians are a joyful people, and their joy is not something superficial and ephemeral, but deep and stable, because it is a gift from the Lord that fills life. Our joy comes from the certainty that “the Lord is at hand” (Phil 4:5): he is close with his tenderness, his mercy, his forgiveness and his love.

May the Virgin Mary help us to strengthen our faith, so that we are able to welcome the God of joy, the God of mercy, who always wants to live in the midst of his children. May our Mother teach us to share tears with those who weep, in order to be able to also share a smile.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What stood out to you from the Gospel or Reflection/ Homily?



Head: What does it mean to you that God is "anxious to show mercy"? What does this tell you about God?



Heart: What has your experience of the Sacrament of Reconciliation been like? What words would you use to describe what you feel upon receiving absolution?



Hands: How can we live with more peace, freedom and fulfillment this week?

PRAYER

Spend some time in prayer with one another:

1. Conscious of what has just been shared, members briefly name/ describe their prayer needs.
2. Intentionally call on the Holy Spirit to be present (for example, "Come Holy Spirit, please be present as we pray")
3. Offer prayers of thanks and praise to God.
4. Pray for each others' prayer needs. Where appropriate, you may like to encourage the group to place a hand on the shoulder of the individual that you are currently praying for.
5. Conclude your prayer time with another prayer of praise, perhaps praying the 'Glory Be'.