

**Homily for the Third Sunday of Advent
December 16, 2018**

When I was a kid, my brothers and I used to fight. A lot. At some point in our arguments, mom or dad would tell us to knock it off and to apologize to each other. Usually our apologies sounded something like this: “**Sorry.**” Obviously, we weren’t sorry. We just went through the motions and did what we were obligated to do; we were told to say I’m sorry, and we said it. No change of heart required. We *atoned* for our bad behavior by fulfilling the obligation to say I’m sorry, but we definitely weren’t *repentant* and had no intention whatsoever of actually changing our behavior.

Today’s Gospel begins with a similar situation. Under the Old Covenant law, a person who sinned was required to make an offering of one or more young bulls, goats, ewes, lambs, turtledoves, or a combination to atone for their sins. What people did in obedience of the law didn’t always come from the *heart*, but out of *obligation*. Like me and my brothers, they merely did what they were required to do. They *atoned*, but they weren’t necessarily *repentant*.

John the Baptist told the people that atonement without repentance wasn’t going to cut it anymore. In fact, if today’s Gospel started just a few verses sooner we’d see that he actually tore into them pretty good, calling them a “brood of vipers,” telling them that beyond mere *atonement*, they needed to produce *good fruits* as evidence of their *repentance*, and *warning* them that every tree that does *not* produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. John’s *admonishment* is what prompted the people to ask, “What should we do?” at the beginning of today’s Gospel.

He responded to that question by telling them that more than just...disconnected observance of the law was necessary; their *hearts* needed to be in it. There must be *interior conversion*, which would be evident by their *actions*, like giving an extra cloak to a person who has none, or sharing food with someone in need. That’s a good reminder for us too. When we are generous and kind because our *hearts* are in it, people notice. It’s a great witness to our interior conversion as

followers of Christ. Likewise, people can also tell when our hearts aren't in it – when we're just *going through the motions*.

Now back to John, in case you didn't notice, he wasn't exactly timid. Remember, he wasn't only talking to *common people* like you and me, but also to people in positions of *authority*, like tax collectors and soldiers. Unintimidated by their power, he boldly challenged them, pointing out some of their behaviors that needed to change if there was to be evidence of interior conversion. He told the tax collectors, who had been collecting more than the required amount so that they could skim a little off the top for themselves, to be *honest* in their dealings. And he told the soldiers to stop abusing their authority and power, to stop falsely accusing people and practicing extortion, and to quit griping about their wages.

John's message was very direct, a radical departure from the norm, and must certainly have hit them where it hurt. We wouldn't have been surprised if the Gospel said they turned into an angry *mob*. But he must have made quite an impression on them because that's *not* what the Gospel says. Instead, it tells us that they were *filled with expectation* and wondered whether he was the Christ.

John wasted no time in setting them straight, saying, no, I'm the Christ. In fact, I'm really *nobody*; but the one who is coming, now *he's somebody*. My baptism is *symbolic*; the one who is coming will bring *baptism of the Holy Spirit*. Mine is a *message of repentance*, but the one who is coming will be the *judge* who will gather the wheat but cast the chaff into the fire. And then John *exhorted* them to *interior conversion* so that they might not be found among the chaff.

The last line of the Gospel tells us that he preached *good news* to the people. His message began with *conversion and repentance* and transitioned to *joyful anticipation of the one to come* – which is of course *Jesus*.

In many ways, today's Gospel mirrors our Advent journey. Advent began with Jesus giving us some pretty stark descriptions about the end of time and cautioning us not to be caught unprepared, drowsy from carousing and drunkenness. That was a call for *conversion*. Then last week we were introduced to John the Baptist, who preached *repentance* for the forgiveness of sins. Repentance *also* points to conversion, because like me and my brothers, you can *go through the motions*, but if you don't have *conversion of heart* there isn't really *repentance*, is there? This week John reinforces that message and gives some examples of what conversion *looks* like. Finally, he leaves us anticipating the one who is to come.

This is Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete is a Latin word that means *rejoice*, or *joy*. Father and I are wearing – not pink! – but *rose-colored vestments*, which symbolize *joy* and *anticipation*. With Christmas a little over a week away, we all experience the same joyful anticipation of the one who is to come as the crowd in the Gospel did. Between now and Christmas you'll notice a greater sense of joyful anticipation in the readings, and you'll hear the same thing in the music led by our awesome choir.

Having said that, let's not forget that we still remain in a time of penance and preparation. Let's take John the Baptist's words to heart, seek *real conversion*, and produce *good fruit* that comes from the *heart*. Because beyond all the *outward* signs of Christmas preparation – the lights, decorations, Christmas music, shopping, baking, wrapping gifts, and all of that stuff – it's *interior preparation* that will lead to *real joy* at Christmas.