

Third Sunday of Advent: Heralds

In this morning's first reading from the third part of the *Book of the Prophet Isaiah* we come upon the passage that Jesus quoted when he read scripture in the Synagogue of Nazareth. The passage begins: *The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the lowly, to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, To announce a year of favor from the Lord and a day of vindication by our God.*

If we cry out to God for help when we suffer a crisis or a traumatic event, how much more must people whose very way of life is a continual crisis call out to God. People who are oppressed, people who are trying to bring their children up in neighborhoods where crime and drugs rule, people who are physically or mentally challenged, people who are suffering pain afflicted upon them by an unfaithful spouse, a dishonest business partner or a wayward adult child, people who are hungry for food that cannot be found or who need medicine for their children that they cannot afford; how many times do these people cry out to God?

They need to experience the Gospel through the charity of others. Organizations such as Catholic Relief Services and the Campaign for Human Development, just to mention two of the hundreds throughout the world, proclaim the presence of God in the charitable works with a far greater efficacy than preaching only with words.

So many people are hurting. So many people are searching for some sort of meaning to the madness of life. They need us to be heralds of God's presence. We are called upon to assume the role of John the Baptist, proclaiming a new way of life, a new kingdom.

Who was this John the Baptist?

In the Gospel for today we hear him declare that he is not Elijah, not the prophet Moses spoke about, nor is he the anointed one, the Christ. Who was this John the Baptist? The first words of today's gospel tell us everything we need to know about him. He is the one who was sent to give testimony. He was sent. The word in the original Greek is *apostolein*, apostle. He was sent to give testimony. The word here in the original Greek is *marturios*, martyr. John the Baptist, Apostle and Martyr. John was the first apostle. He was the first one sent to proclaim the presence of the Christ. He was also the first Christian martyr. John was the first one to give testimony to the Truth of Christ among us. He paid with his life for his testimony to Truth.

We are called to be like John the Baptist. We are called to be apostles and witnesses. We have been entrusted with a mission from God. We have been created for a purpose. We were given God's life at baptism so we can share his life with others. We are his witnesses. We are called to make the presence of Christ a reality in our worlds by giving witness to his presence in our own lives.

The world deeply needs our witness to Christ. Look how evident that is right now, just two weeks before Christmas. For many people Christmas has become a pagan celebration. Materialism is their god. All mention of spirituality is rejected. They claim that Christ does not exist, or that if he ever did exist he has lost his impact upon the world. With this as the basis of their lives, they condemn themselves to a life of frustration. Because they reject Christ, they reject his cross and find themselves incapable of putting sacrifice for others before their own selfishness. They demand that all mention of Jesus be taken out of Christmas. They refer to Christmas as the gifting season. They want the feast of Christ's presence among us to become the exact opposite of the whole reason why God sent his Son. They reject Christ and contort Christmas into a celebration of materialism. Their Christmas models their lives: shallow, empty, meaningless. And they hurt. They hurt because deep within themselves they need this Messiah whose life they have rejected. But where can they find him?

The world that has rejected Jesus Christ needs witnesses to His Presence. The world needs new John the Baptists to point to Jesus. We are called to be these witnesses. We are called to stand up before friends, families, working companions, or maybe just that idle acquaintance and say, "For me, the Life of Christ is more important than anything the world can offer." If this reality is present in the core of our being, the Holy Spirit that is within us will convince others of the truth of our witness. We are called to wear a cross, not just around our necks but imprinted upon our very being. We are called to sacrificial lives, for we recognize the presence of Christ in our families, among our immediate society, and throughout the world. We are called to reverence God in every action of our lives because our commitment to Christ is the whole reason for our lives.

The very world that has rejected Jesus craves his presence. The world that has rejected Christ is made up of the lowly, the brokenhearted, those who are captive to the gods of materialism. They are seeking meaning to life, but they do not know where to find it.

We are the new heralds of the Kingdom. We have been sent by God. We are the new apostles. We are the new witnesses. We are the new martyrs. We are the new John the Baptists, apostles and witnesses. We have a responsibility to the world around us to reflect the presence of Christ. Others need to find Jesus. Others need the testimony of those who are sent by God.

We, apostles and witnesses, the new Baptists, will best prepare for Christmas if we spend time determining how we can fulfill our mission of reflecting God's presence in the world.

"There was a man named John, sent by God to give testimony to the Light." People whose lives are in darkness are seeking meaning, are seeking light. May our lives lead others to rejoice in the Light of Christ.