

GETTING READY FOR CHRISTMAS: 3RD SUNDAY OF ADVENT C

One day a preacher on the Yarra Bank tried to make real for his listeners, the message of John the Baptist today. *'If you had two houses,'* he said, *'you would give one of them away to the poor, wouldn't you?'* *'Oh, yes,'* said the man closest to him, *'I certainly would.'* The preacher went on: *'And if you had two motor cars, you would keep one and give the other away, wouldn't you?'* *'Yes, of course,'* said the same man. The preacher continued. *'And if you had two shirts, you would give one away, wouldn't you?'* *'Just a minute,'* said the man this time, *'I haven't got two houses. I haven't got two motor cars. But I have got two shirts. I'm not so sure now that I would give one away.'*

This time the message hit home. Here was something personal, something pointed, something practical. Here was a real challenge that triggered off a genuine struggle to respond to the demands of the message.

Something like this is happening to the people who go out into the desert to listen to the preaching of John the Baptist. He implores them to turn away from sin and to turn to God, and to express their sorrow for their sins and get forgiven by being washed in the waters of the Jordan River. He is offering them what they know deep down they really need - a brand new start, a brand new way of living. But they are not sure what it all entails.

The people in general and particular groups among them ask John the same question: *'What must we do, then?'* The answers they receive boil down to three straight-forward rules of life: - 1. *Share with others both food and clothing.* 2. *Be fair and just in your dealings with others, and never cheat anyone.* 3. *Don't bully others or push them around.*

The power of John's preaching and personality makes a deep impression on the crowds. They begin to ask one another: *'Can this be God's chosen leader, the messiah?'* John puts them right: *'I have washed you with water,'* he says, *'as a sign that your hearts should be made clean. For someone stronger than I is on his way; I am not good enough even to bend down like a slave and untie his sandals. He will bring you the full power of God, the Holy Spirit. He'll really change your mind, your heart, your attitudes, your behaviour, your whole self. He'll be like a farmer at harvest when, wooden shovel in hand, he cleans the grain on his threshing floor - storing the wheat in the barn and making a bonfire of the straw.'*

This message of John the Baptist hits the spot with us. We are living in the time of the first coming of the Messiah, his coming at Bethlehem. Right now we are preparing to celebrate his birth, and, as our Opening Prayer puts it today, *'to celebrate [it] with love and thanksgiving'*.

So, our time of preparation for the feast of Christmas is much more than getting in the goodies for eating and drinking and making merry on Christmas Day. It's a time for heeding the message of John the Baptist on the meaning of God's special coming into our lives in the person of His Son.

So we are led to ask ourselves. 1. How widely and deeply will I share with other people this Christmas, and especially those who are the poorest and the most neglected in my community? 2. How fair and just am I going to be with the people in my life? 3. Will I stop once and for all putting others down, hurting their feelings, or bossing them around?

'The Lord is very near', St Paul reminds us in the second Reading. So near in fact that the other readings insist: *'The Lord your God is in your midst'*, and *'among you is the great and Holy One of Israel'*.

The presence and the gift of Christ to us invite us to make a triple response. In the first place, God says to us in the Readings, *'Shout for joy ... shout aloud'*, *'cry out with joy and gladness'*, *'rejoice, exult with all your heart'*, *'be happy, always happy in the Lord'*. In the second place, God asks us to change our lives, along the lines pointed out by John the Baptist. In the third place, God suggests that we pray: *'There is no need to worry; but if there is anything you need, pray for it ...'*

As we move now from the celebration of the Word of God to our meeting with Jesus in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, let us remember the triple response to the coming of Christ which God invites. Let us rejoice, let us ask God for whatever we need, and let us open our hearts and lives to living as both John the Baptist and Jesus the Messiah have taught us to live.

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