

Homily for the Third Sunday of Advent, 2018

With Water, and with Fire

Notice two things about John the Baptizer's preaching that we just heard. First, all his instructions on how to "prepare the Lord's way" have to do with greed and generosity: give your spare cloak or food to the needy; do not extort unfair taxes; be content with your pay. And second, John expects that something huge is going to happen, beside which these sorts of preparations will pale: "I am baptizing with water, but He will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

Now imagine we could transport John or his hearers to today: would they see anything that would convince them that John's prediction of something huge had in fact happened? I'm not talking about a bare belief that the messiah had come in John's cousin Jesus. Looking around, what evidence that the world has changed because of Jesus' coming would John or his contemporaries see?

It's easy to imagine that things that can still sort-of amaze us, from airplanes to cellphones, would catch John's attention. But there's something else, something we take for granted, that would even more amaze him and convince him that the baptism of "Spirit and fire" had in fact come to earth. John could see it down the hall, in the classrooms bulging with food donations and Christmas gifts for poor families.

You see, in the Roman world of John's time generosity to someone who wasn't connected to you by a bond of family or friendship was unknown. You just didn't imagine giving to strangers. It was expected, and universally taken for granted, that the needs of strangers would be, and should be, ignored. Among the Jewish people there was concern for the fellow-Jew; but remember that the "Parable of the Good Samaritan" was triggered exactly by a teacher of the Jewish Law asking Jesus, "and who is my neighbor?" Since Jesus' time there's a new answer to that: Every poor person is your neighbor, and is deserving of care.

The idea that people today simply assume – that it's admirable, even fair, the mark of being a good citizen and good neighbor – to give for the well-being of the poor – is the result of centuries of people "baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire." Institutions to care for people in need – hospitals, orphanages, public welfare departments, as flawed as they've been and sometimes still are – have their origins in what John predicted: the coming of Christ and the Way He taught. All those institutions started out because of Christian belief. That we, and even most nonbelievers, now take such things for granted would amaze John, and convince him that he was right in a way and to a degree that he never could have imagined.

We need to pay attention to the huge, massive success of Christ's teaching in our culture; it's too easy to be consumed by the genuine problems we still face, and so to lose hope. As we also heard today, Paul encouraged his congregation to resist that: Rejoice in the Lord always! Put all anxiety from your minds! Today's readings invite us not to complacency but to a quiet and confident hope that God's promises are not empty, our hope is not in vain. You can look at the piles of food and presents for the poor, and know that the Spirit of Jesus is at work.