

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent cycle C  
December 17, 2006

Although I have no artistic aptitude myself, and perhaps because I have no such aptitude, I marvel at the ability which some people have to create works of art. I appreciate not only the end results, but also the hard work, the pouring in of self, and the creativity that accompanies the work of the artist. And so it is distressing to me, as it is to most people, when artwork is vandalized, stolen, or destroyed. What a dichotomy between the artist and the vandal: one who creates, and one who destroys. One who is just trying to make the world better and one who is determined to make it worse. And that is so much of the world we live in. Go through the newspaper, and nearly every story will be one or the other: those who are making the world a better place, and those who are making the world a worse place; those who are building up people and things and societies and cultures, and those who are tearing them all right down.

In the Gospel passage we heard today, John the Baptist is addressing the crowds. But it may be good to know the context of the passage: right before the part we just heard, John is telling off the leaders of the Jewish people, and in no uncertain terms: “You brood of vipers, who told you to flee from the coming wrath?” Well. I think we know how John felt about them. But, they deserved it; no, more than deserved it, they had to hear those words. They had become like so many vipers, poisoning the people by imposing upon them a law that God did not impose, beyond even what the Romans imposed; the leaders were the ones holding the people down, destroying them little by little, making things worse for them, and ultimately drawing them away from the God whom they claimed to be serving. But Luke tells his story from the side of the common man: the crowds are flocking to John the Baptist to hear him preach about the need to repent and reform, they’re hanging on to every word of sermons that most people generally are in no mood to hear. And they ask John, “then what should we do?” What’s the solution to our situation, if indeed we have been drifting away from God rather than moving towards him? Man, think of how harsh the answer could have been, think of how demanding John’s solution might have been for them. This is the man, after all, who was known above all others to lead an austere life. He might tell them that they *do* have to give up everything which they have, *deprive* themselves of every conceivable pleasure, *renounce* family and friends and career and go live in the wilderness just like John had, go live in the wilderness alone with just God. But John doesn’t tell them that they must do that, and in fact, his message to them is quite simple: if you’re one of those who is making the world a worse place, with your extortion and lies and cheating and scheming, then stop it. Stop making things worse. And instead, look around you at the needs of others, see how *you’ve* been blessed; and make things better.

“What must I do?” If you have two coats, give one to the man who has none; if you have more than enough food, give some to the man who is hungry. John doesn’t say to give everything away, and to die from the cold and the hunger; but if you’ve been blessed, then share; be generous. Look around, during the remaining days of Advent: how can we be generous, during the next week? Oh, sure, most will be exchanging gifts; big, big difference between the generosity involved in a gift *exchange*, and simply giving a present, with nothing in return. There are so many outlets through which we can give during this season; if your finances allow you, give at least one gift to someone who seems to receive little from the world. Give something to a shut-in, to a newcomer in the neighborhood, give anonymously if you’d like; but give something. Give some time to someone who is longing for some of your time: take your spouse out to

dinner, sit down and play a board game with your child, go and have a cup of coffee with an elderly neighbor or with a relative in a nursing home. Make a point, each day for the rest of Advent, of giving out a compliment: one a day. Look for the good that people do, the things that they pour their heart and their efforts into, and recognize it; build people up.

Luke continues: even tax collectors came to be baptized and they said to him, “teacher, what should we do?” John answered them, “stop collecting more than what is prescribed.” In other words, stop stealing. Now, most of us probably aren’t thieves in the classic sense, petty or otherwise, but think of the things which we do sometimes rob others of: their dignity, their self-worth, their reputations. I would venture to say that most of us tend to steal more with our tongues and our lips than we do with our fingers and hands. If we need an Advent goal for the coming week, to really prepare ourselves for the coming of our Lord, how about this: say “I’m sorry” to someone that we’ve hurt with our words, hurt with our attitude, hurt with our tone of voice or with our inattentiveness; but have the humility to say it. Make a point of saying “thank-you” and look for someone to say it to who maybe isn’t expecting it. When I look at the people who I work with every day, and if I began the list now I don’t think I could end it in an hour, wow, “thank-you” should be half the words coming out of my mouth. But I, like many, take those around me and all that they do for granted, and I know that I need to make a concerted effort to overcome that tendency. Say “I forgive you” to someone who has maybe struggled with their own mistakes; let bygones be bygones, if the other guy is truly sorry. In doing so, we will cleanse our souls of all sorts of debris. And we will make things better for someone around us; with our words, we can restore at least some of what we have taken from others.

The soldiers also asked him, “and what is it that we should do?” He told them “do not practice extortion, do not falsely accuse anyone, and be satisfied with your wages.” In other words, do not lie, do not grumble, and do not try to show off your power. Maybe we do these things to others, but these are some of the most common offenses against God himself. Each time we lie, we offend the God of all truth; each time we grumble about our state in life, we grumble like the Israelites against the giver of life; each time we try to show how much power we have, we pit ourselves against the All-powerful. Think we don’t offend God with these? What’s our attitude towards God like, over the long haul? Do we worship him, willingly and completely? Stay for the last verse of the last hymn, because the song gives him glory and praises him? Do we make time for him; do we really deny ourselves out of love for him? The penultimate theme of the third Sunday of Advent is to rejoice: the coming of the Lord is close at hand, it’s almost here. But how can we say we rejoice in his coming, if we don’t even rejoice in his presence? Rejoice at Mass: stay until the end, and participate the whole way through. Rejoice in God’s mercy: take advantage of the abundant confession times being offered in all the Catholic churches this week. And most of all, prepare to really rejoice in his birth, by really, really making Jesus the center and focal point of your Christmas celebration. Worship him with your whole heart: put the gifts aside and the dip in the fridge and dinner on the back burner, worry about getting caught up on your sleep the day after, and give Jesus the heart of your Christmas Day. Wrap up Advent with the spirit of the words of the prophet Zephaniah: “The Lord, your God, is in your midst; he will rejoice over you with gladness.” If God rejoices over us, how much more should we, at his coming as man, rejoice over him; and what better way to rejoice over him, than to make his world a better place, and to love him with sincere worship.