

What Should We Do?

3rd Sunday of Advent – Year C

Zephaniah 3:14-18a
Isaiah 12:2-3, 4, 5-6

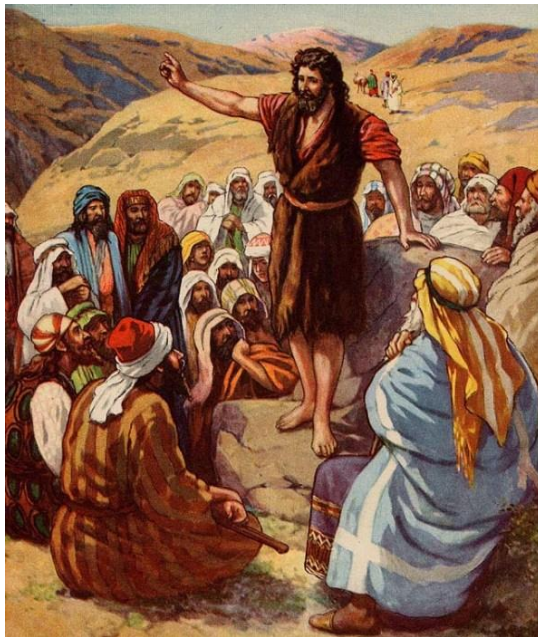
Philippians 4:4-7
Luke 3:10-18

No one likes to be told what to do. This is especially so if someone points out that we are doing something wrong, or at least incorrectly; somewhat so if we are shown a way that is better than what we are accustomed to. Because of this, some of the teachings of the Church can often be met with indifference if not outright hostility. We see this phenomenon in the Church's ongoing efforts toward greater liturgical development, but this is especially the case in regard to the Church's moral teaching. Even if the people themselves actively seek the Church's input on a particular issue or moral question, there is at times great apathy, outright hostility and deep resentment toward the answer the Church often gives. This is because people, for the most part, are not seeking *guidance*, but rather *approval*; if not from the Church, than from another superficially authoritative body or individual.

[In the Gospel reading for the Third Sunday of Advent (year C), having the two previous Sundays been reminded of Christ's immanent return, and having already heard the cry of John the Baptist to "prepare the way of the Lord," and before we hear the

Gospel stories that pertain to the First Coming of Christ in Bethlehem,] we hear, [again] in the context of John's preaching, examples of how we "prepare the way of the Lord" as he gives very direct answers to questions brought to him by his followers – people from "various walks of life – who come to him asking: "What should we do?"

The Gospel According to St. Luke is perhaps the most compassionate of the four Gospels, something very appealing to our modern, feel-good approach to faith and



religion. Luke is also, however, the most direct; something particularly unappealing to our post-sixties mindset, which likes to shy away from absolutes, or definitive, black and white concepts. One need look no further than Jesus "Great Discourse on the Plane" (Lk 6:17-49) to find examples of how unrelentingly direct Jesus can be in his instructions on how we are to act as his followers. Jesus' parables, some of which are unique to Luke's Gospel – even some of the most

familiar stories – have strong underlying messages that speak directly to the people's tendency toward social and ethnic bias (Good Samaritan – Lk 10:25-37), the celebratory acceptance of the return of those who have strayed (Prodigal Son – Lk 15:11-32), and the fact that our actions and our

John the Baptist

lifestyles will meet with particular consequences, especially when we delude ourselves and fail to heed God's message when it is right there in front of us (Rich Man and Lazarus – 16:19-31). Even Luke's account of the Crucifixion includes a strong, and very well known reminder of our unconditional, inexorable obligation to forgive (Lk 23:34a).

For the disciples of John the Baptist, Luke is equally straightforward in directing the people on how best to "prepare the way of the Lord." His instructions continue to direct us down through the ages – "Share with those who have none"; "do not extort...do not falsely accuse"; in money matters: "don't collect more than what is prescribed." All challenging teachings that require everyone to examine their lives to discover where God is directing them to grow, improve, change and convert.

[In this year for priests,] John's mission and example is a poignant reminder for both priests and faithful of what our faith is all about and what the Gospel calls us to as we "prepare the way of the Lord." Sometimes that standard of the Gospel can be very unnervingly specific as it directs us, as John directed his followers.

For all of us who are followers of Christ, both clergy and lay faithful, John's message continues to resonate as we all ask the question: "What should we do?" Apply and live the Gospel in all aspects of our lives, be they our private lives, family lives, worship lives, even in our careers and our socio-political associations; so that nothing separates us either from the love of Christ, or the Gospel He has given us to emulate. For parents: Teach your children the faith

so that when they are grown they will actually practice it and pass it on to their own children. For teachers: Be consistent in applying our Gospel values in all aspects of your students' lives.

For us priests, John's direct approach is a reminder that ours is not a mission to tell people what they want to hear, but rather one of truth as we direct the flock under our care; not a mission to make the Gospel message easier and more palatable, nor to add burden upon burden, but one of passing on the message of the Gospel and the direction it gives us all, with all its challenges, chastisements, comforts and consolations; not a mission whose primary goal is to keep people happy by giving them what they want, when they want it, the way they want it, under the timorous facade of being "kind" and "pastoral", but one to direct, lead, encourage and guide as we all work to "prepare the way of the Lord."

[As we prepare to celebrate the coming of Christ in Bethlehem, and await His coming again in glory,] let us continue to hear

John the Baptist's direct, unrelenting approach to "what we should do." Let us recognize the instructions of both the Baptist and his successor, Jesus Christ, in and through God's Word and Church teaching, as they tell us what to do – correctively, progressively and boldly – in order to live and bear witness to the Gospel, as we "prepare the way of the Lord".

Fr. Bill Nicholas
originally published in the
Catholic San Francisco
during the *Year for Priests*
December 11, 2009

...ours is not a mission
to tell people what
they want to hear, but
rather one of truth as
we direct the flock
under our care...