

3rd Sunday of Advent 2018

As we prepare for the Nativity of our Lord the issues that surround us this Advent season are enormous. In the middle east, we struggle to find peace, peace among the nations and among ethnic groups, peace in our own homeland, and peace between our political parties.

The now sixty-plus year old drug problem still plagues us throughout our country. On the one hand there are those states that elect to permit recreational drug use and on the other hand we are no closer than ever to finding a cure for drug addiction.

How can we put an end to the idea that if it feels good do it and our need for immediate satisfaction?

There are other problems too: the continuing decline of the nuclear family, lack of housing for many, child abuse, dysfunctional families, the battle over gun sales, and on, and on, and on. These problems are seemingly so divisive that we are tempted to throw up our hands and declare that there is nothing we can do to overcome them.

Today's Gospel presents us with John the Baptist, the last and the greatest of the Old Testament prophets. He was proclaiming the advent of the Kingdom of God with the coming of the Messiah, and the need to repent and change our own individual sinful ways. His audience must have wondered how all of their national problems were connected with their own personal lives.

If God's Kingdom was about to be established, how could any one individual hasten or hinder its arrival? If the entire Jewish people needed to repent and convert, of what consequence was the conversion of any one individual?

"What should we do?" was their critical question. It is likewise our own critical question. Their society was like our society. God's answer to their question and ours was and is: Everything depends upon YOU!

The society surrounding John the Baptist had poverty problems just as ours does. What could they do about it? John the Baptist said they could share their resources. The person who had two coats could give one of them to the person who had no coat at all. Those who enjoyed surpluses could share of their abundance with those who had nothing.

Would it solve their national poverty problem? Well, yes, if enough people would change their lifestyles. Each and every individual's effort alone would not suffice, but all individuals summed together would make a huge difference in our world.

Political corruption? People abusing their privileges as holders of the public trust? Certainly there was a lot of such abuse back when John the Baptist was calling for a national house cleaning. Likewise we, too, in our times, know of political corruption, those using their offices of public service for their own private and personal gain.

What could individuals do about it? Probably not much. But nothing would change unless individuals changed. Individuals could do *something* rather than simply do nothing. John seemed to think it would make a difference if even one governmental official cleaned up his way of conduct and started running an honest operation.

Violence? Abuse of power? Abuse of others? The people in John's society certainly suffered those things. And so do we! And to the extent that we refrain from using our positions of privilege in order to abuse others, humiliate and demean others, to that extent the boundaries of violence and abuse of others will be pushed away from us as a people.

The sad state of our world can be traced back to our own arrogance both individual and as a society. Intellectual superiority deployed upon others, military dominance, and our own economic prosperity improperly imposed on others whom we judge to be lesser persons leads to resentment, bitterness, and eventually anger and hatred. Violence is the inevitable result.

It is too easy to superficially blame our own moral failures on the moral failures of our society as a whole. We have heard too much of such weak excuses, rationalizations claiming that we are dishonest because society is dishonest, that we are ruthless in our business practices because "it is a jungle out there," we are promiscuous because so many others, especially our media stars, are promiscuous, we are selfish and materialistic because our culture is selfish and materialistic. Society will become more honest when individuals become more honest, because every society is simply the sum of its individual parts.

Wars and violence will subside when we refrain from our own forms of violence toward each other. Poverty will begin to disappear when we are less self-centered and are free from a strong desire to acquire more and more. Sexual abuse will subside when we become more pure and liberate our youngsters from the imprisoning delusion that they are simply the helpless victims of their inner sexual drives.

We must see again that morality is not simply a private matter. Morality is a public matter that involves us in sharing our common wealth, a common good into which we contribute our individual and personal lives.

John the Baptist's voice still heralds the coming of God's Kingdom amongst us. His call for repentance and conversion remains just as valid today as it was back then. Everything depends upon what each and every individual does in his or her own personal life.

Salvation will not be assured and society will not be changed, unless each individual recognizes the absolute necessity for personal conversion and change. That is why the founding fathers of our nation, men like Jefferson, Madison, and Adams, repeatedly stated that it was absolutely necessary for the general populace to be moral, for without a moral electorate our newly founded Democratic Republic would fall. Do you need proof of their predictions? Take a look at what is happening to our nation today! Educators and individuals need to realize that morality is something far greater than mere political correctness.

Thomas Jefferson's ideas about the importance of morality were of enormous influence in both the Northwest Ordinance and our Constitution. One of Jefferson's greatest contributions was contained in Article III of the Northwest Ordinance which stated that "*Religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.*" The point not to be missed is that morality is quite necessary for good government and our happiness in living together in a peaceful society.

Advent is a time for you and for me to clean up our acts. It is all a matter of getting down to the task of doing it first, instead of waiting for everybody else to first change their acts. Advent is a time for you and for me to admit our moral shortcomings and to recommit ourselves to correcting them. For if we are obsessed by what others are doing, thus diverting the moral spotlight from shining upon our own souls, then nothing will change.

John the Baptist's "voice crying in the wilderness" has remarkable relevance for us in our lives today. For if we lose our moral sense of what is right and what is wrong, we risk losing not only our souls but our country as well.