

**ECHOING GOD'S WORD
IN
THE CATHOLIC COMMUNITY
THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT
DECEMBER 17, 2023**

SCRIPTURES:

Isaiah 61:1-2, 10-11	God's year of favor is here. All nations will come.
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24	Believers must be faithful.
John 1:6-8, 19-28	The Baptist brings light into the darkness.

READ THE SCRIPTURES:

Read the three Scripture passages given in the Lectionary for this weekend. Begin with the Gospel, since the other readings are always chosen in terms of the Gospel reading. (The second reading does not always have the same theme as the Gospel and the first reading. The first reading will be directly related to the Gospel in its content.) Repeat the Gospel reading. Remember that the word of God in the Bible is primarily addressed to the faith community and does not necessarily answer any questions that an individual may have. We simply ask, "What message does the Church (or this faith-sharing group or this family) need to hear?" We listen to the word with that question in mind.

John:

Surprise! John's Gospel is used instead of Mark for the Third Sunday in Advent since John provides a fuller picture of the ministry of John the Baptist as preparing for the coming of Christ. The Church finds a more complete source wherever possible to emphasize the work of the Baptist as the Coming approaches.

There were some disciples of John who had not followed his advice as he pointed to the One Who Was To Come. They were still looking for John to come back from the dead. Early Christians had to reach out to these who were still preaching the repentance called for by John but were not centered on Jesus as the Christ.

John's Gospel always has harsh words for *the Jews*. This refers not to the Jewish people in general but to the leaders in Judea who refused to hear the message of Jesus. We must be careful not to apply the harshness of this passage to all Jewish people in general. Both Jesus and John were *laymen*, as it were, in Judaism. They were not priests of the Temple. They did not seek badges of honor. They simply proclaimed, "The love of God is the only asset worth anything at all." Being loved by God gives us our value, not the positions we hold in the Church or in society.

John claims that the right to baptize has come to him from God who has sent him and not from any certification at the hands of religious leaders. He is not the Christ; he is not Elijah; he is not the Prophet. He is simply one sent by God to point to the Christ who is to come. This Gospel wants its hearers to know that they too get their authenticity not from established religious structures but from the God whose message they bear.

The right to ministry for members of the Church today does not come first from any decree of the Church granting it any inner authenticity. Its inner authority comes from the power of the Holy Spirit received in baptism and developed in prayer and in service. The Church can only direct the ministries of its members; it does not create them nor grant them out of its own resources. The call and the gift of ministry come from God. The Church has a right and duty to test, to verify, and to organize the gifts of the faithful. God empowers; the Church guides and directs.

Isaiah:

Three different writers from different time periods have contributed to what we know today as the Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39 from the great Isaiah of Jerusalem, before the Babylonian Exile (587-537 BCE); Chapters 40-55 during the period of Exile; Chapters 56-66 toward the end or shortly after the Exile. There is a deeply felt sense of hope after the return to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the Temple. Isaiah witnesses to God's truth that God will come personally to sustain the chosen ones. By extension, we apply this prophecy to Jesus who is God "in person," coming to sustain the weary. In Israel, a jubilee year was a time of great blessing when God showered blessings on the poor and all debts were forgiven. The Messiah comes to establish justice and bring relief to those who are poor. The *bride and groom* theme suggests a time of fertility and abundance of food.

1 Thessalonians:

Early Christians worried that the Lord might come and worried that he might not come! If he comes, who will survive? Paul says that a strong and loving community life can provide support in the expectation of the Second Coming. Speculation and anxiety about the Coming are of no benefit. *Spirit, soul, and body* do not refer to different components of the person, as if they were separable from one another. The expression means the whole person in all its dimensions. Of all the books of the Christian testament, this was the very first to be written, around the year 50-51. It reflects some of the earliest concerns among the followers of Christ.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is the primary mission of the Church? To grant holiness or to point to the holiness that God has already given? Does the Church make people holy or does the Church guide people to the holiness of God? Of course, Christ is at work in the sacraments of the Church which produce holiness, but the Church did not create those sacraments; the Church serves as custodian of the means of holiness. Would you say that the mission of the Church is to do both?

2. In what way does your parish community, your family, your faith-sharing group, have a responsibility to proclaim the good news that Jesus Christ is Son of God, Lord and Savior of the world? How does the group carry out that responsibility? Does proclamation hold priority of place among all the other responsibilities of the parish, the family, etc.? How can you tell if the emphasis is first on proclaiming the Good News?

3. Today, if you are going to give witness to Christ as Messiah and Lord, how are you going to do that? What are some of the ways that you and your family can be more effective in doing the good that calls attention to Jesus rather than calling attention to yourself?

SUGGESTION FOR CHRISTIAN ACTION

In your last-minute planning for Christmas, you might be able to find a charity or a family that can use a half-hour or an hour of help: answering the phone, babysitting, sharing a pre-cooked meal, or some other act of kindness. Personal presence to a lonely person, a cheerful phone conversation with a shut-in, a family member you have not spoken with recently. Reaching out in love.

PRAYER

Pray the "Magnificat" from Luke's Gospel (Luke 1:46-55). Enter into the sentiments of the Blessed Virgin Mary as she praises God for the wonderful things God has done in her life.

CATHOLIC DOCTRINE

The rights of conscience have always been controverted both in Church law and in civil law. Can anyone, Church or state, coerce me into doing something I believe to be wrong? Who is to decide what is right and what is wrong?

In the 20th century, we saw the Nuremberg Trials in the late 1940s, where German leaders from the Nazi era were convicted of war crimes even though they claimed they were just following orders. The Military Tribunal said there was a higher law which took precedence over the orders of men. Implicit in these judgments was the claim that there is a *law of conscience* that perceives rights and wrongs in the objective order no matter what the civil or the military laws might hold. Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., practiced *civil disobedience* in response to unjust civil laws. They appealed to a *higher law*, the law of conscience. Christian martyrs went to their deaths during the past 2,000 years rather than to comply with human laws they considered contrary to the law of God.

The Catholic tradition holds that conscience is the final arbiter of the rightness and wrongness of human conduct. Final judgment will be based on our perception of whether what we did was right or was wrong according to the law of God. *Conscience* is that faculty by which we are *aware* of the innermost rightness or wrongness of certain behaviors. The Church teaches that the human heart can and does know instinctively what is right and what is wrong.

We cannot make something *right* if it is inherently *wrong*. But we cannot be judged or faulted for believing something was right even though it was objectively wrong. Conscience needs to be guided by teachers who have been given the responsibility to teach what is right and what is wrong. The Church claims that right for itself. A Catholic will seek guidance from Church teachings in the formation of conscience. A Catholic will ask advice from mature and experienced Christians in order to form a right conscience. But, ultimately, conscience will be the guide.

Each of us has a responsibility to develop our *conscience awareness* according to the revealed will of God in Holy Scripture and according to the teachings of the Church as

articulated in the moral tradition of the Church.

Firmly rooted in the faith community and seeking to be loyal to the authentic tradition of the Catholic Church, we may consult other voices, but finally, we must decide, personally.

See: The Catechism: # 1778-1796

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