

3rd Sunday of Advent – Gaudete - (Year B) – December 17, 2017

IS 61:1-2A, 10-11; LK 1:46-48, 49-50, 53-54; 1 THES 5:16-24; JN 1:6-8, 19-28

Back in the late 90's while I was still **living in Seattle**, and long before I entered the **seminary**, I went to the Cathedral in Seattle one day to pray. I entered the small side chapel where they celebrated daily Mass. If memory serves correctly, the altar was in the middle with chairs set up in a rectangular perimeter around it. Think of the **courtside seats** in a basketball arena with the altar at “center court”...and you'll get the picture.

One of the chairs within this perimeter was significantly larger and fancier than all the other chairs...and it had a *cushion*! Since my plan was to stay there for a while to pray, I chose *that* chair because it was more comfortable than the hard, bare chairs.

Now, it didn't take a genius to figure out that the larger chair was for the priest celebrating the Mass in the chapel. But since there was no Mass at that time, and since it was a side chapel and not the main church, I didn't think sitting in that chair didn't would be a problem. What I didn't realize was that it was the **bishop's** chair!

Even though *I* didn't know whose chair it was, the *officious woman* who burst into the chapel a few minutes later sure did. Now, in her defense, I think this woman worked for the Cathedral...but *boy, did she let me have it!* “**That's the bishop's chair! Who do you think you are sitting there?**” Needless to say, the contemplative atmosphere in the chapel—not to mention my ego—was shattered.

Now, **my** motivation for sitting there was “comfort”. But I can only imagine what *she* thought my motivation was: **This, presumptuous, disrespectful guy... pretending to be someone important...sitting where he had no business sitting.**

Whatever her point-of-view, I was blind to the **objective truth** of whose chair it was, because I acted out of *ignorance*. I may have had been justified to object to her **tone**, but not to the *truth* of her words. I had no business putting myself in a **higher-ranking person's place of authority** and I **needed** to have that truth revealed to me.

In fact, if I were to walk into *this* church today and see *anybody but the bishop* sitting in *that* chair—even when there's no Mass—I would probably have a **conniption** fit of my own—though I hope I would handle it a bit more gently than that lady did with me. In my 7 ½ years here at the Cathedral, I honestly **can't**

remember *ever* sitting in the bishop's chair—even when **nobody else was in the church!** There are just some things you *don't* do...and sitting in the bishop's chair...**when you're not the bishop...**is one of them!

Now, knowing...and **respecting**...one's proper place in the **hierarchy of things** is not just a case of **silly scrupulosity**. It's respect for the chain of authority which **God establishes...in order to guide us to him**.

It also **protects us** from getting in over our heads—taking on more **honor** or **responsibility** than we are **equipped by God** to handle—whether we act out of **ignorance**...or out of **arrogance**. The devil brings about the downfall of many by convincing them to exalt themselves **beyond** what God asks of them.

Consider the circumstances surrounding **John the Baptist** in today's Gospel passage. His powerful **message** and personal **charisma** attracted a lot of people to him. The **Gospel of Matthew** tell us that people from **Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan** (cf. Mt 3:5) came to hear his **message** and to be **baptized**. I mean, even **Jesus himself** submitted to John's baptism! John even had his own **disciples!**

So, the devil targeted John, tempting him to present himself as greater than he actually was. **But John didn't fall for it**. And the **way** he deflected the devil's attack gives us an excellent example for us to follow.

First of all, John chose to live in the desert **deliberately**. It afforded him had a **simple lifestyle**, he ate a **simple diet** and he had **few distractions**. His **disciplined choices** about his **way of life** guarded his **heart** for God.

By protecting himself from the kinds of things that compete with God for one's attention, John the Baptist developed an **intimate spiritual communion** with God which gave him both the **courage to proclaim God's truth**, and to **appreciate God's love for him**, not to mention his **total dependence on God**.

Because he knew **who he was in relation to God**, John the Baptist was **humble**. So humble, in fact, that, **despite enjoying the respect and esteem of the throngs of people who came to him**, as well as the **disciples who followed him**, he did not allow all that to go to his head. He understood that his mission was to **introduce**

someone far more important than himself, and even to encourage *his own disciples to abandon him*...and follow the Messiah.

So, when asked by the priests and Levites if he was the Messiah, or Elijah or a great prophet like Moses, John refused to *steal another's glory to stroke his own ego*, even though many would have believed whatever he told them. He could have made himself more important, but he chose not to.

One Scripture commentator sums up the benefits of this kind of humility:

Humility brings freedom from this frantic bondage. Trying at every turn to affirm, exalt, and protect oneself is an exhausting enterprise. Receiving one's dignity and self-worth as a gift from God relieves us from this stressful burden.

<http://catholicexchange.com/john-baptist-spiritual-joy>

It takes a strong person to be as humble as John the Baptist. He practiced what he preached: ***“He [Jesus] must increase, but I must decrease”*** (cf. Jn 3:30).

John's complete **acceptance** of his proper place in relationship to Jesus—was the result of his **disciplined choice** to focus on God and to avoid the distractions and temptations that could pull his **attention**...and his *heart* away from God.

Jesuit Fr. Alfred Delp, who was a significant figure in resisting the Nazis in Germany during World War II, helps us understand how **Advent** can be for **us** what the **desert** was for **John the Baptist**, when we said:

The primary condition for a fruitful and rewarding Advent is renunciation, surrender. Humans must let go of all their mistaken dreams, their conceited poses and arrogant gestures, all the pretenses with which they hope to deceive themselves and others.

<http://catholicexchange.com/scripture-speaks-rejoice-waiting>

Even after John declined to place himself on a pedestal with the heavy hitters, his interrogators him pressed to explain why, then, he was **baptizing**, John replied:

“I baptize with water; but there is one among you whom you do not recognize, the one who is coming after me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to untie.” (Jn 1:26-27)

The key words for our purposes are: ***“one among you whom you do not recognize”***.

When we allow the distractions of this world crowd Jesus out, we lose sight of him. If this habit persists for a lifetime, we may become so unfamiliar with the Lord that, at the end of our lives, we will not know *how* to receive him, because **we won't recognize him** when he comes to us.

I have seen this happen in my own extended family, with a relative who abandoned the Catholic faith for decades. He had **so completely invested himself** in the temporary things of this life—particularly **material success** and **reputation**—that he couldn't bring himself to accept **God's mercy in the Sacraments** before he died. He had looked away from Jesus for so many years, that when Jesus came to him Sacramentally in his last hours, he didn't realize that *it was Jesus* offering him the **love** and **mercy** his soul was starving for at that moment.

Anything we allow to **dominate** our lives and **distract** us from the Lord, becomes our "**god**". And because human beings are **made** for *worship*, if we don't worship the True God, then we will, *inevitably*, worship **someone** or **something** else.

I think, for example, of my friend **Matt the Atheist**. He rejects **religion**, but when it comes to *his* "god"—the *climate change agenda*—he's more zealous about the **environment** than the most ardent **fundamentalist Christian** is about the *Bible*. If **Catholics** were even **half** as zealous about *Jesus*, as **Matt** is about *global warming*, the entire world would be Catholic!

Most people who worship **false gods** don't even realize they do so, because their **idolatry** is so deeply *ingrained*. And such **counterfeit worship** is just as real **in** the Catholic Church as it is *outside*.

Within the Church, this the Catholic who "**goes through the motions**" but who has *no actual relationship with Jesus*...and for whom the **faith** is more **custom** or **obligation** than anything of **real consequence**.

The moment something more interesting comes along, this person will abandon **prayer** or even **Sunday Mass** without the slightest twinge of conscience...assuming they come to Mass very much at all.

This dynamic is further **compounded** by the *manic pace* and *endless distractions* in our society that prevent us from **slowing down**...and **stepping back**...long enough to examine our lives and to identify **who** or **what** is truly our "**god**".

Today's **Gospel** passage is from **John, Chapter 1**, verses **6-8**, and then it jumps to verse **19**. In between are some **key verses about the Son of God** which read:

The true light, which enlightens everyone...was in the world, and the world came to be through him, but the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, but his own people did not accept him. (Jn 1:9-11)

These words are just as relevant today as they were when they were written some **sixty years or so** after Jesus' death. Just as many in Jesus' time did not **know** him, there were also those who **did** know him but still *rejected* him.

And the same is true in our own time.

Just as Jesus comes to us in the **Eucharist**, there are those today who have heard the teaching of Jesus' **Real Presence** in the **consecrated** bread and wine and still do not **know** him. Still others, who **know** that Jesus is Truly Present in the Eucharist, do not **bother** to *engage* him—either because of their **indifference**...or because they are **mired in patterns of sin** that they have no *interest* in giving up.

It's a great tragedy is to squander **the Advent Season**—remaining so **wrapped up** in our *distractions* and *addictions*, that we miss the opportunity to *stop...just long enough*...to see if **Jesus** really has *any significant role in our lives*.

It's **bad enough** for us to say to Jesus, "**I really don't know you.**"

It would be *far worse* if...at the end of our lives...**he** said those same words to *us*!

On the other hand, if we accept the Church's invitation to prepare our hearts for Jesus to dwell there, then *this Advent* will be our occasion to declare...with the **Prophet Isaiah**:

I rejoice heartily in the LORD, in my God is the joy of my soul... (Isa 61:10)

...and with the **Blessed Virgin Mary**—the Mother of Jesus and **Our** Mother—who said:

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my Savior... (Lk 1:46-47)