

Reflection

Sunday, December 15, 2024

I grew up on a small farm nine miles away from Rushville, Missouri. We went to a quiet church, but our neighbors on the next farm went to a noisy church. Every summer they had a “Revival,” and for some reason our neighbor, Sallie Mae, always took me too. I remember nothing about the sermons, but I remember one day on the way home asking Sallie Mae why preacher was always mad at us. “Oh,” she answered, “He’s not mad, he’s just trying to get us to act good.” I guess that is why I’ve always loved Saint John the Baptist.

In our gospel reading today we have John the Baptist. He starts with name calling. You brood of vipers. Wow, a knot of snakes! That is a pretty low estimation of his audience. Bear fruits: what does that mean? Worthy of repentance? I guess that means do things that show our repentance. Do not say “we have Abraham as our ancestor. God is able to raise children from these stones.” I think that means our God is greater than our social standing, our tribe, or our nationality. There is no using our worldly importance as an excuse to not repent and do good works. “Even now the axe is lying at the root of the tree”. What a picture that gives me: the woodsman just sat down his axe for an errand, and will come back soon to chop down our tree ... meaning maybe our lineage or our family tree forever. And a threat! If we don’t bear good fruit—good behavior, charity and love of others—we will be thrown into the fire!

Straight rough talk. John the Baptist does not mince his words ... and yet the people came.

Elsewhere we read he was so cherished in Jerusalem that the populace believed him to be a prophet.

Next, John tells the listeners concrete examples of what one must do to bear good fruit: share. If you have two coats, share one. Share food. If you have extra, share with those who have none. Even tax collectors, well known for cheating people and skimming money are told, “Collect no more than what is due to you,” no dishonesty in your job, no crooked dealing at work. “Soldiers, I see here authorities and civil administrators, and police: no extortion, no bribes, no lying for profit! We hear a lot about oppression in our society today. John has clearly set rules for honesty in our jobs and lives.

Can we imagine how refreshing this must have sounded to the people all around river Jordan and to those who came from Jerusalem ... to imagine the comfort of living in a place where everyone is treated honestly?

At last John brings us The Good News. Someone is coming after him- someone more powerful and more holy. John is preparing the way for our Savior! And our Savior will bring the Holy Spirit! Bringing to the former brood of snakes transformed by repentance, the glory of God to those who repent and live right and righteously.

Now let's look at our first reading. Zephaniah was written between 640 and 609 years before the birth of Christ. Here we find peace, God's love, and forgiveness. God will rejoice over us, remove disaster from us, and deal with our oppressors. How wonderful, but this is 700 years before John the Baptist. How can that be?

In our second reading Paul is writing to the people who live in Philippi, and, by extension, us. We are loved and reassured. "Do not worry about anything ... in prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God," and we are promised "the peace that passes all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Jesus Christ".

Indeed, it surpasses my understanding, but I believe our readings today inform and instruct us. Yes, we are sinful. Our world is suffering with war, oppression and environmental degradation, but John the Baptist has given us The Good News. Bad times happened before, and bad times will probably happen again, but those who know and love the Lord rejoice in the joy of his salvation. God is with us. Jesus said, "and remember I am with you always to the end of the age," and said "in this life you will have trials and tribulation but fear not, I have conquered the world".

Amen

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