

Homily for the Third Sunday in Advent 12th December 2020

+ *In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.*

Today's Gospel has the interaction between Jesus and the Disciples of John the Baptist. When questioned about his person, purpose and ministry, Jesus clearly lays out his Messianic credentials before them:

"4 Jesus answered and said unto them, Go and shew John again those things which ye do hear and see: 5 The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. 6 And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me."

Having answered them, they depart, and Jesus turns his attention to John the Baptist: *"7 And as they departed, Jesus began to say unto the multitudes concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken with the wind? 8 But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? behold, they that wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. 9 But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet. 10 For this is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. 11 Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist"* What a tribute Jesus pays to John the Baptist!
.....but then, Jesus says the strangest thing: *"notwithstanding, he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."*

Now, here is something to ponder upon. Me? Greater than John the Baptist? Is that possible? Yes, it is possible, but only because, unlike John, we have seen the works of Jesus and have believed in him as the Messiah, Jesus Christ, and have engaged in the work of the Gospel, something John never had the privilege of seeing or doing. From afar, he had pointed to Jesus and said: *"Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world"* Jn 1:29
...but then he had been removed from the story by the greed of Herod.

But still, how can I ever be *"greater than he"*? Let us explore how Advent is directing us carefully towards a triumphant and holy Christian life....

The Epistle of the First Sunday in Advent was from Romans 13, and in verse 13 Paul wrote: *"14 But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof."* What does it mean to *"make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof"*? Our minds probably move immediately to "Sex, Drugs and Rock and Roll" but that is a very simplistic way of looking at the lusts of the flesh. Although they could be a part of our sinful conduct, there are many more insidious temptations of the flesh that keep us from ever reaching our potential in Christ. Let us look a few. We lie a lot and pretend to be or do that which we are not...we speak of holding spiritual values, but those are only thoughts, and not realities.

We are idle....we do not study our scriptures as we should, not because we don't have the opportunity, or don't have a Bible, but just because that takes effort, and we don't want to do it – plain and simple. We are cowardly – if we are to look at our personal proclamation of the Gospel of Salvation, we are scared of what people might say, and how we might be branded as 'a fanatic'. Our image is unfortunately more important than our duty!

We procrastinate – our Lenten and Advent resolutions are seldom met, not because they are too difficult, but because we put them off for another day....and so we never grow.

We are not generous – clergy struggle to get cooperation in terms of basic Christian giving, but we are not slow to spend on ourselves, or indulge ourselves in other ways!

Too frequently, we simply capitulate to the lusts of the flesh, and we never reach that blessed state of “*putting on the Lord Jesus Christ*” and becoming a true reflection of Him in the world.

John the Baptist did not live in ‘Virtual Reality’; there was no pretense in his life.

He was a splendid, exciting, authentic and magnetic man of faith.

If he criticized the Jew’s empty religious rituals, it was because he fasted and prayed without ceasing.

There was nothing cowardly about John the Baptist; he fearlessly proclaimed the Kingdom of God and confronted evil when he saw it. 4

He could speak out against Herod’s corrupt life because he was living a blameless and moral life himself.

Being “*greater than he*” will be no easy task! It is quite refreshing to measure ourselves against another ‘ordinary’ person and *not* against Jesus, as is so often the case, but John the Baptist is quite a measure, to be sure, and a real challenge to our own Christian performance! I know I fall way short of his high standard, his passion for God, his obedience and his fearless courage. I do not fast and pray as he did, and in comparison, my life is as shabby as the garments he wore.

John the Baptist forces me to confront my complacency, cowardice, laziness and lack of discipline and passion for discipleship, and love of my Lord.

The Advent Collect (which we should know off-by-heart at this stage of the Season) has been urging us to “*put off the works of darkness, and put upon us the armour of light*”. Three weeks ago, I mentioned that this is a DO prayer and not a THINK prayer, and here we are...John the Baptist has called us out by his quality of being and by his deep and visible devotion to God.

Advent is nearly over.

Soon it is Christmas and then comes the beautiful time of the Epiphany.

How will we ever be able to have an Epiphany of our own if our lives are not immersed in the Scriptures and empowered by the Holy Ghost? How will we ever see the Lamb of God as clearly as John the Baptist saw Him on that day in Palestine? Without discipline and a steely resolve, our Epiphany will remain an elusive thing....

“*it is high time to awake out of sleep : for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed...*” (Rom 13:11)

I wish you a blessed Sunday, and great moments of progress in your journey of Faith in this Third Sunday in Advent, and the week ahead.

May the words of my mouth, + and the meditation of all our hearts, be now and always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Strength, and our Redeemer. Amen