3rd Sunday in Advent 2024

Belfast has never been busier! The volume of traffic appears to have greatly increased; no doubt, the Boucher Road, Forestside, and Sprucefield, will be chock-a-block this afternoon. The children have brought to Mass this morning the Infant Jesus from their family crib for the Bambinelli blessing – a sign that they are preparing for Christmas. Preparation for “the big day” takes hold of everyone at this time – cards being distributed, presents decided upon, the Christmas tree being decorated, the turkey ordered – is it any wonder that so many complain of being quite “frazzled”!

In the tranquillity of our beautiful church, Morning Mass offers us an oasis of peace, in which we are gently drawn into the presence of Jesus himself, who asks for nothing but our love. It is he, when all is said and done, who is the “Star” that shines at the heart of faith, the one we follow on our life’s journey. Preparation for the festival of his birth surly serves to remind us that preparation is a key attitude to the whole of life!

In today’s Gospel passage we encounter John the Baptist who *“prepared the way for the Lord”.* As John was preaching, groups of people came to him asking, *“What are we to do?*”, how are we to prepare for the Lord? The same question arises in our minds. For our benefit, the Gospel passage singles out three particular groups. First there are the ordinary people, who scratched a living as best they could, and suffered in silence; then the tax collectors who in the service of an unjust government oppressed the people; and finally, the soldiers, despised as violent and thieving thugs in the service of a heartless dictator, the Roman emperor – it takes little or no imagination to identify similar cruel regimes in today’s world. In singling out these three particular groups, the Gospel is making the point that no one is outside the loving and forgiving mercy of God.

A true preparation for Christmas is the recognition that, while each of us is in the need of the mercy of God, none of us is beyond that mercy. A real Christmas blessing for us all, would be to participate in our Penitential Service next Sunday, and to see in John the Baptist’s response to the question “*What must we do?”,* a possible examination of conscience and life.

In the so-called civilization of Rome, life for the ordinary people was harsh. They yearned for something to improve their lot in life. In John the Baptist’s preaching they sensed change in the air, *“a feeling of expectancy had grown among the people”*. Instinctively they sensed that this was something they must prepare for, and so they asked John their heartfelt question, *“What must we do?”* In his reply, John didn’t place great demands on them, rather he simply said, *“If anyone has two tunics he must share with the man who has none, and one with something to eat must do the same.”* Concern for others, particularly the disadvantaged, is at the heart of the Gospel. Those ordinary folk mentioned in the Gospel, look out at us, and remind us, as we prepare to celebrate Christmas, to be less self-obsessed, and to be aware of the needs of others.

The tax collectors were notoriously dishonest – they frequently collected taxes far in excess of those levied; they lived off the backs of the ordinary people. However, John the Baptist's preaching was such that it stirred up some latent sense of decency. Encouraged, perhaps by John’s reply to the ordinary people, they in turn asked, *“What about us, what must we do?”* Again, John made no exceptional demands, he simply responded, *“Exact no more than your rate.”* In other words, treat your fellow citizens fairly, honestly, and justly. These tax collectors now look us in the eye and ask, “In your dealings with others, are you avaricious, or fair, honest, and just?”

Then some soldiers approached John. Generally under paid, they used their muscle to supplement their income by intimidation and extortion – and the authorities turned a blind eye! Yet, there seems to have been a spark of decency left in some of these erstwhile thugs, as they also asked, *“What must we do?”* John answered is obvious, *“No intimidation! No extortion! Be content with your pay!”* These soldiers look at us, and ask, *“*What about you? Are you content with your lot, or are you eaten up with envy? Does anger and violence seethe in your heart?”

John the Baptist gave simple clear directions to those who asked, *“What must we do?”* His answer was, “be conscious of the needs of others; live as you should; be just in all you do”. St Paul taught that the greatest of the Christian virtues is love – love becomes a lived reality, when we recognise, and we repent of all that so sours life for ourselves and others.

*“Lord, may we grasp that great secret: salvation is through love and in love. Renew us by your love and guard our hearts and our thoughts in Christ Jesus”.* **Amen.**