

Second Sunday of Advent, Year A – December 4, 2016 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Sat., 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 775 words

“You brood of vipers!” – St. John the Baptist certainly had a way with words. And thus he enters onto the Advent scene this Sunday, shaking us, as it were, out of our slumber and drawing our attention to the Lord’s coming with a call to conversion. He speaks with great conviction; it’s really the kind of certainty and force that startles those who hear and leads them to wonder: “maybe he knows something that we don’t”. And he makes it clear that much is at stake, saying: “every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire”, and telling that the Lord has a “winnowing fan is in his hand. He will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” It must have been a memorable day for those who heard him.

We need to round out the life of St. John the Baptist a bit more, in order to make sense of his role in Advent. We recall from the Gospel of John that John the Baptist recognized Christ when he passed by and pointed him out to others, saying, “Behold, the Lamb of God”; immediately before that, he had spoken of Christ as “one among you whom you do not recognize, the one who is coming after me...”. John, therefore, was pointing to a Jesus who was already present but not yet known by all. And isn’t that the way things remain today? Christ is present in our midst – in the Eucharist, in his Word, in the Church – but not all, not even all Catholics, know him as present here and now. John the Baptist’s task then is still needful now.

But as we learn more about him we see that behind all of his fiery preaching, there was a man who himself had not yet fully come to know Christ. And I do not wish to imply that John was in any way wrong in his preaching. It’s just that he also had to mature in his relationship with the Lord. Another way of saying it is that he had to heed his own words. His fundamental call was to conversion and he spoke mostly against outward offenses. For example, in the parallel passage to this Sunday’s gospel that is found in the Gospel of Luke, John tells tax collectors to “stop collecting more than what is prescribed”. He tells the crowds to share from their abundance with the needy. And he exhorts soldiers not to practice extortion.

But there is a deeper conversion than must take place in our lives; we must turn all of our being toward Christ – not just our external behavior. And so in next Sunday’s gospel we will hear another detail about St. John the Baptist’s life which is very relevant. We will see John in prison, wondering if he had really gotten the right person. Maybe he had been mistaken, because it seemed that none of the fire and brimstone that he preached was coming to pass. So he sent messengers to Jesus, who asked, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” And how did Jesus reply? He said, “Go and tell John, ‘The poor see, the lame walk... Blessed is he who takes no offense at me’.” John accepted that response, and then he willingly died for Christ.

Again, John had been preaching about one whom he had recognized, but himself did not fully know. He had been preaching about conversion, but himself needed to undergo a deeper conversion – not in his outward behavior, but in his mind, his intellect. His life was oriented to Christ, but not totally; there was still more to turn toward the Lord. This ultimately was John’s life-project, and it is the task of us all: to come to know Christ more fully and have every aspect of our lives turned toward him. And so much of that involves recognizing the one who is already in our midst, and not seeing him as a far-off proposition, someone whom we’ll only really meet at some unknown hour in the future.

During this Advent, then, John proclaims to us: “Behold, the Lamb of God” – “there he is, follow him, he is in our midst”! He also tells us of our future judgment, which depends upon how we act now. He therefore calls us to a total conversion – one that he, in his own way, also

had to undergo. May he intercede for us this Advent, and so obtain for us the grace to heed his call.