

The Inclusive Community

Third Sunday of Advent

December 13, 2009

Homily of Anthony T. Padovano

Luke 3:7-18

Theme: Joy

The scene in today's Gospel is dramatic, with contrasts that take us from trauma to joy, from shadows to light.

Luke opens the third chapter of his Gospel with an historical setting.

"In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea and Herod was ruler of Galilee...the word of God came to John...in the wilderness."

Luke gives us a wide view of the world scene and then the camera focuses, not on the emperor or governor or a ruler but on a man with nothing to recommend him politically, a powerful preacher in the desert. It is this man, John, whom history will remember and not those who were the top leaders of their day.

Luke said that you had to get there early to hear John. Crowds came into the desert to hear him. Those who would avoid a visit to Jerusalem by the emperor rushed into the desert to hear a prophet because he spoke to their hearts and gave them hope. In the final analysis, these are the only people we really hear and value.

John the Baptist does not give us Hallmark sentimentality and shallow hope. He takes us into the darkness of our lives and of history. He demands that we live lives that matter, that we not become "vipers," poisonous to other people. He tells us that those who give their lives to status are blockheads, quite literally. "So, he says, you claim status as the children of Abraham and you fantasize that some of you are more the heirs of Abraham than others. Such a stupid, silly game. Grow up. God can make children of Abraham from these stones where you are standing. Blockheads! Don't come out here with your legacy and resume, when you are living a rotten life, literally rotten. I want to be the ax that cuts down the rotten tree to its roots. I want to be the one who throws away the tree that does

not bear fruit into the fire. I want all of you with empty, predatory, pompous, useless lives to see that you are as ugly as a dead tree.”

Indeed, no Hallmark sweetness here.

Luke then notes something extraordinary. The message is lost on the “brood of vipers,” the elite of Jerusalem. It is heard by the marginal people whom the leaders despised. They ask John:

“Help us to see the light. We do not want to be bad people. We are not sure how to do this. The Temple, religion, sacrifices, priesthood have not helped.”

John responds:

“You have that right. Life is not about piety but about compassion. God does not want a pious heart, a prayerful heart, unless that heart is compassionate. Find people who need clothing and clothe them. Find people who are hungry and feed them. See all the suffering around you, everyone is in pain, and heal the agony. Bear fruit as a tree of life.”

The two most despised classes in Israel now come to him. The tax collectors worked for Rome and were riddled with greed, with bonuses and stock options and health-care plans. They were violent, dishonest and unhappy. John reached them. No one else got through but he did. His answer startled them. You can go on being a tax collector and find God and become compassionate. Stay with what you are doing but do it honestly. Do not collect one cent more than the tax code stipulates. Do your job of collecting taxes and take nothing for yourselves. Try that. Tell people they owe less than they thought they did. And let them live and breathe free, without your violence and intimidation of them.”

And now the second despised group comes forward, the soldiers. They were Jewish soldiers who enforced Roman law on their own people. They were often used as thugs by the tax collectors to threaten people with weapons and warn them they would report them to the Roman authorities for tax evasion if they did not come up with the money the tax collectors wanted.

Again, John startles people. “Do not stop being soldiers,” he says. Just stop the extortion, the threats, the lies, the false accusations. Give people a sense of security and protection. Be honest, for God’s sake.”

John does not ask people to go to the Temple and pray but to do for others what they would want done to themselves. His spirituality is practical. Stay where you are in life, he says, but become a good person there.

As John addresses the shadows in all our lives, he stirs hope in those who hear him. They ask tremulously: “Are you from God? Are you the Messiah we long for and want so much to see?”

John does not want power or fame. He says: “I am not. I am not even worthy to be the Messiah’s slave. You know that a slave takes off the master’s sandals. I am not even worthy to loosen the sandals of the Messiah. I tell you, though, the Messiah is near. Rejoice. I baptize you with water. He will cleanse you with the fire of love. He will send God’s spirit into each of your hearts. He will bless you and heal you and love you. All I do is to get you ready for the Messiah, with the waters that wash you so that you are not ashamed for the Messiah to see you.”

Rejoice, John says. The time is near. You will see the face of God soon. God will be one of us. Rejoice.