

Homily 12/11/22

Here we are at the third week of Advent, Gaudete Sunday which is a counterpart to Laetare Sunday in Lent. Similar to Lent, Advent is a penitential season and Gaudete Sunday provides a break in the midpoint of the season, a break meant for joy. For Gaudete can be defined as expressed, exuberant joy. It's a time to rejoice as we draw closer to the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ.

When I was with my nieces in North Carolina munching away on pizza and ice cream, Kristen and Emily started a game where everyone answers the following question "If you could have dinner with three people (alive or dead), who would it be and why?" Have you ever played that? Being a recent seminarian, I had experience at this game. But there we felt obligated to first say, well Jesus, obviously. At my family game night, there were a couple relatives who blurted out Jesus' name right away but mostly we just had a lot of fun with it; in fact, we played multiple rounds because some like myself couldn't decide on celebrities, our favorite athletes, family members or Biblical characters. Well, if I were to choose today, I sure would want to have dinner with Jesus, John the Baptist and the author of Matthew.

Because what is going on at the start of the Gospel reading today? "When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" What?! In last week's Gospel lesson John the Baptist spoke of the one that is coming who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. The lectionary editors cut that passage short, but the author of Matthew continues with "Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?'" Clearly here John knows who Jesus is. The author of the gospel of Luke writes that Jesus and John the Baptist were cousins giving us a definite reason why they would know one another but this is not mentioned in the other three canonical gospels. In the gospel of John, when John the Baptist sees Jesus coming toward him at the Jordan river he declares "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" He knows who Jesus Christ truly is.

So, at my dinner with Jesus, John the Baptist and the author of Matthew, I want to ask what really happened at Jesus' baptism (did everyone see the Spirit descending like a dove, was there literally a dove, and did everyone hear the voice of God)

and what the author of Matthew is trying to show us here in chapter 11. For yes, John the Baptist knows fully well who Jesus is. And yet...there John is in prison,

no longer able to preach and baptize, nothing to do but think and pray. It's possible that he might have some doubts creeping in, maybe some fear for his future. Yet John is familiar with wilderness living, I can't imagine that he is breaking down physically, mentally, or spiritually. But he knows his disciples are without their leader and that they may be fearful, anxious, depressed, and doubts might be creeping in for them. What do we do if they don't release John, what if they kill him? Do we really follow this Jesus guy? Can we be sure he is the one to follow? So, John sends his disciples on an assignment to Jesus to ask him themselves "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." John's disciples would easily recognize that Jesus is quoting the prophetic writings of Isaiah that we read in our Hebrew Scripture lesson today "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy." In Jesus' answer to John's disciples, he is declaring that he has fulfilled this prophecy. Not only do John's disciples know this now, the audience of Matthew's gospel from the time it was first read aloud up to our time know this is what Jesus is saying.

I'm reminded of the passage from the gospel of Luke that we read back in Epiphany when Jesus reads a prophecy from the scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue at Nazareth: "He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.' And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Jesus Christ drops the mic there and he drops it again here in the gospel of Matthew. Listen, are you having fears, are you having doubts about me? When Jesus cites Isaiah's prophecy, John's disciples, Matthew's ancient audience and we

today know the rest of this passage from Isaiah. Jesus is saying I **am** the Holy Way; follow me and even when you have doubts, even when you have fears, even

when you sin, I will not let you go astray and you will have joy.

Look, when Jesus speaks of those he heals - the blind who receive their sight, the lame who walk, the lepers who are cleansed, and the deaf who hear – he is not only speaking literally but also metaphorically to the condition of all people, including John’s disciples, his own disciples and us. We all have doubts and questions at different times in our lives and Jesus says, keep following me, I am the way, I have come that you may have abundant life, I have come that you may have joy. I am with you in your suffering, I am with you in your happiness, I am with you in your struggles, I am with you in your victories.

I don’t know about you but sometimes I get overwhelmed or at least distracted in my life by the advice and opinions of others. It’s easy to lose focus on Jesus Christ, what ministry God is calling us to in our lives...for each of us has a ministry. There are so many voices out there especially on social media. Yes, we can use social media to spread the good news of Christ, and yes, there is a lot of hurtful noise and so-called influencers on social media. Folks today still look for spiritual answers, just as the crowds were when they came to John the Baptist. Jesus asks them “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind?” In Ephesians 4:14-1 we read, “We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.” “A reed shaken by the wind” is a good description of those who are blown about by all the misinformation and misguided psychobabble found online and in printed books. It is not a good description of John the Baptist. Maybe that’s what the crowds did come to see, the mad prophet living in the wild talking crazy stuff, but he just kept on pointing folks to repenting and preparing for the coming of the Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ. Pointing us to focus on Jesus.

One of my favorite songs is “Breathing” by the band Lifehouse. The lyrics are essentially a prayer which is what first caught my attention when I heard it on my local pop rock station back in 2000. One verse in particular speaks to me of those times of being overwhelmed and feeling lost “I’m looking past the shadows in my

mind into the truth and I'm, Trying to identify the voices in my head. God which one's you? Let me feel one more time what it feels like to feel alive, And break these calluses off of me, One more time.” This sounds like when the

apostle Paul writes of the “renewing of the mind” in his Epistle to the Romans. “Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.” Paul is pointing us to focus on Jesus.

On this Gaudete Sunday as we draw closer to the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ, let’s remember that the joy of the Lord is our strength. God has abundant grace and mercy for all. And let’s remember that this is a season that can be painful as well as joyous. The death of a loved one, financial pressures, strained relationships, flu and COVID all contribute to it not always being such a joyous season for our brothers, our sisters, our neighbors. If you are feeling just weary or in pain, reach out for help. If you see someone weary or in pain, reach out to them with the love of Christ. Our lessons today are filled with hope you can share with others. Isaiah writes “Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, be strong, do not fear! Here is your God, He will come and save you. And the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.” The Psalmist writes “Happy are they who have the God of Jacob for their help! whose hope is in the LORD their God; Who made heaven and earth, the seas, and all that is in them; who keeps his promise for ever; Who gives justice to those who are oppressed, and food to those who hunger. The LORD sets the prisoners free; the LORD opens the eyes of the blind; the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; The LORD loves the righteous; the LORD cares for the stranger; he sustains the orphan and widow but frustrates the way of the wicked. The LORD shall reign forever, your God, O Zion, throughout all generations. Hallelujah!” Amen.