

Commentary to the 2nd Sunday of Advent (A)



Second Sunday of Advent: Not by

Appearances I love dressing up for Sunday Mass, and I love seeing so many in our parish who dress up for Church. People are very interesting. Everyone has his or her own look. Consider me. I have my own look. And it takes a lot of time for me to get this look. The washing, the primping, the Just for Men, the combing; it takes a lot of time. Then there's the picking out the right outfit for the day. "Let's see what should I go with today, black, or black, or my favorite, black?"

A teenager once asked me why priests wear black. I told him, "school colours." Anyway, having primped and chosen my wardrobe, my day starts with me making the proper appearance as a priest. I hope you appreciate it. Because God, certainly, does not care. "Not by appearance shall he judge," we just heard in the first reading from Isaiah. He is not impressed by our coiffure, our wardrobe, or even our demeanour. He doesn't care if someone has a pietistic attitude that makes you wonder if he or she is a model for a plastic sculpture of a saint. He doesn't care if someone does not appear different than any one else. He doesn't care.

There was no missing the Pharisees and Sadducees when they came before John the Baptist in today's Gospel. Both groups had distinctive garb to demonstrate their holiness. John, reflecting God's attitude, was not impressed. He called them a "Brood of Vipers." Definitely not impressed. Nor does God care what anyone says about someone else. You know, "She is really a saint," or "He is such a loser." No, God doesn't judge by hearsay either, according to Isaiah. So, how does God judge? And why was John so negative regarding the Pharisees and Sadducees who came to be baptized? According to Isaiah, God judges by actions. He judges by justice. The way people live, the way they treat others is what matters.

He judges by justice. The biblical concept of justice is deeper than the legal connotation of justice. In the Bible, justice is the correct relationship with the Lord. Evidence of this relationship is seen in every action of a just person's life. We call a person a "Godly Man or a Godly Woman" because the love of

God is seen in the way he or she treats others. The Godly Man is a Just Man. The Godly Woman is a Just Woman. That's why John was furious with the Pharisees and Sadducees. There was nothing godly about these self styled paradigms of holiness. They were more concerned that others respected them than they were about how they treated others. They looked down at people as though they were dirt. But they were the ones whose bellies were in the dirt. So, John called them by their just name, Brood of Vipers. If they wanted to prove John wrong, they could. He told them they could. What they needed to do was produce good fruit as evidence of their commitment to God, of their repentance.

That's why John didn't kick them out. He baptized them too. Have you mastered proper, plastic, pietism? Can you get your heads tilted at the proper slant so that all around you will expect you to be swooped up into heaven at any moment? I hope not. That is not what this Kingdom that John proclaimed is all about. What the Kingdom of God is about is wisdom and understanding, and counsel and courage and reverence for the Presence of God. The cardinal virtues are first found here in the reading from Isaiah. Each virtue speaks about seeing God in others and in the world and acting according to that vision. Each virtue leads us to make justice the band around our waists.

Imagine what a beautiful world we would live in if people were truly godly. It would be a world where there was no hatred, or fear, or war, or suffering. Isaiah became quite poetic when he considered this world: the wolf shall be the guest of the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the baby goat, (kid actually), the calf and the lion shall browse together and the lion won't have veal for lunch. The cow and the bear will get along. And children would no longer die. The baby will play in the cobra's den and not be bitten. The child will put his hand in the adder's lair and not be hurt. "There shall be no harm or ruin on my holy mountain," the song we love to sing for Advent comes from here, Isaiah 11. The ideal is upon us. The Kingdom of God is transforming the world. And we can be part of this transformation. We can change the world by being godly people.

We can change the world by being people of justice and love. The manner that we treat others has far deeper implications than our relationship to this or that individual. When we are kind to someone, we are making the Kingdom a reality in that person's life. When we treat someone with justice, we are providing the world with an experience of God's presence. For example, let say that a retired person's adult children have been rather unapproachable during the year. They have not bothered about the family. Their own lives were too important and too busy to call to Mom or Dad. Now they want to come to visit for Christmas. Mom and Dad may feel that they have a right to treat them coldly, but if, instead, they are kind and loving, forgetting their absence in past and enjoying their presence, than those children will know what it is like to be welcomed back home not just by their parents, but by God. They will have an experience of the Kingdom of God in the justice of their Godly parents. Maybe it's not the children of a retired person, but a brother or sister who has hurt a sibling and now wants to be warm and friendly for Christmas. Perhaps, they did the same thing last year and the year before, then restored hostilities shortly after the tree came down. It makes no difference. No one can hold a grudge and be a Christian.

The conquest of the Kingdom is more important than the rationale for an argument. When people are genuinely welcoming, when people are warm, then they are godly people working to transform the world, one person, one grudge at a time. Perhaps it's the Teen in school who has invented new ways to be nasty to others. He or she is the least popular person in the class, a distinction he or she has earned by saying things about others, by making others' lives difficult, by just plain being mean. Shock him or

her. Give this Teen a Christmas card and truly wish that he or she has a beautiful Christmas. You will be giving the Teen a great Christmas present, an experience of God. You and I need to do this and similar actions, because we have the blessing of being called into the Kingdom of God. Not by appearances does the Lord judge, but by justice, and kindness, and the determination to let the presence of God prepare others to enter His Kingdom. This is justice. And this justice will transform the world. That is our Advent Hope.

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