

DECEMBER 10, 2017

Second Sunday of Advent

Reading 1 [IS 40:1-5, 9-11](#)

Responsorial Psalm [PS 85:9-10-11-12, 13-14](#)

R. (8) Lord, let us see your kindness, and grant us your salvation.

Reading 2 [2 PT 3:8-14](#)

Gospel [MK 1:1-8](#)

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God.

As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: *Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you; he will prepare your way.*

A voice of one crying out in the desert: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths." John the Baptist appeared in the desert proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. People of the whole Judean countryside and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem were going out to him

and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they acknowledged their sins. John was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He fed on locusts and wild honey. And this is what he proclaimed: "One mightier than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

HOMILY:

A young man named John received a parrot as a gift. The parrot, who had previous owners, had a bad attitude and an even worse vocabulary. Every word out of the bird's mouth was rude, obnoxious and profane. John tried and tried to change the bird's attitude by consistently saying only polite words, playing soft music and anything else he could think of to "clean up" the bird's vocabulary. Finally, John was fed up and he yelled at the parrot. The parrot yelled back. John shook the parrot and the parrot got angrier and even ruder. In desperation, John threw up his hands, grabbed the bird and put him in the freezer to "cool him off" for a bit. For a few minutes the parrot squawked and kicked and screamed. Then suddenly there was total quiet. Not a peep was heard for over a minute. Fearing that he'd hurt the parrot, John quickly opened the door to the freezer. The parrot calmly stepped out onto John's outstretched hand and said "I believe I may have offended you with my rude language and actions. I'm sincerely remorseful for my inappropriate transgressions and I fully intend to do everything I can to correct my rude and unforgivable behavior." John was stunned at the change in the bird's attitude. As he was about to ask the parrot what had made such a dramatic change in his behavior, the bird continued, "May I ask what the turkey did?"

Why tell such a story at church? It is a parable, a fable in which we can use to explore our own lives and choices we make. In this case, when faced with the toxic and even deadly effects of his foul attitude, the parrot saw the value of changing its ways. A reflection on this story could help us consider how and why we might consider changing our ways. Last Sunday, when we considered the first of the Advent voices, which called us to be attentive to the voice of God calling us to acknowledge a need for a savior. This week, we advance our Advent project with this question: HOW might we approach such a savior—and how might that Savior come to our aid? How might we experience God's mercy and what path might we take to that mercy? To this end, let us consider more closely the parable of the parrot.

In the story, at first it seems that the bird definitely experiences a change of heart—faced with the consequences of its actions, it sets a different course. But . . . is that actually what happens? In fact, what motivates the change in the bird? I would suggest two possibilities: fear and a clearer understanding of what had been its faults. **First, fear motivated the change.** When faced with a cold freezer and a fellow bird that seemed to be ahead of his wayward path, fear moved the bird to change. And, indeed, fear of the consequences of our actions can be a powerful force. But . . . is it lasting? Once the threat is removed, we tend to lapse back into old habits, isn't that true? While fear can motivate change, it is not usually a

lasting change, especially when the source of fear is removed. **Second, a clearer understanding of faults** could have motivated the change. The bird, instead of motivated by fear, might have come to its senses and understood that its hostility to its master would not end up well for the bird. In a moment of clarity, it might have understood it had to stay on its master's good side. It saw, it thought, what the master could do to the turkey, and decided a change was in order. But . . . again, does understanding one's faults (and the implications of them) necessarily lead to a change? For example, I understand that eating too much will lead to a decrease in my health, but does that understanding translate to a change of behavior? While fear and a clearer understanding of our faults can be means to change, I think we can all admit that the change might not be lasting if the habit is deeply ingrained.

Friends, this issue of how to arrive at a change of heart in our lives is vital—because it is the very heart of the Christian life. Being a Christian means experiencing, more and more, a deep conversion of heart, to have a heart more like that of Jesus. It is to this that our repentant voice, St. John the Baptist in the desert, speaks to all followers of Jesus in his preaching of a “baptism of repentance.” What is this baptism of repentance, and how shall we receive it? His baptism of repentance, like all sacramental moments, involves an external gesture (the baptism in the Jordan River) to express and signify an interior change, seen more keenly in the accompanying gesture by the people: the acknowledgement of their sins. What we do, then, in the process of a change of heart, is simply to acknowledge that our current ways are not working. We have not loved our God and neighbor as we ought. But, notice the mere recognition of our faults does not a change of heart make! It's only the preparation, the acknowledgement that my current course is not a life-giving one and stopping that direction. This act of knowledge is like that of that parrot, when it saw its life's direction was leading now where good. But it is not the full answer to a change of heart.

For the lasting change of heart to occur, the gospel indicates that something more radical will be needed. In this scene, from the very beginning of the Gospel of Mark, after his preaching of a baptism of repentance, the necessary preparation for a change of heart, St. John the Baptist then shows how a lasting change of heart can occur, when he says, “One mightier than I is coming after me. . . . I have baptized you with water; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” For the change of heart to happen, then, we will need to go to Jesus and ask for his baptism, which is not merely a baptism of repentance, but more a baptism into His life and the giving of a new heart. We will change our hearts, finally and fully, only when the Lord gives us a new heart.

For in the end, repentance is not the final goal of our lives, it is only a step in a more radical conversion: taking on the very heart of Jesus. We spend so much of our lives hoping, striving, pleading with ourselves to repentance, to change our ways, not realizing that this is only the first chapter in a larger vision our God has for our lives: a new heart, which, when given us, allows us to live fully. We will obtain a changed heart when we are given a new heart, a heart with which we can choose the good without attraction to our former faults.

The Christian life is about taking on the heart of Jesus. He desires to give this heart to us if we will but come to His merciful heart, wide-open to us in the Eucharist we are sharing. A deeper understanding of what motivates our failures (“why do I do that?”) or a fear of the effects of my faults (“I could end in the freezer, or maybe someplace much, much hotter!) is not a lasting, full way to that heart of Jesus. Instead, don't need a fearful heart, or a more fully understanding heart—we've tried those. What we need is a new heart, one after the heart of Jesus. It is for this that you have come as a child at Bethlehem: that we might have life, and have it to the fullest (*cf.* John 10:10). Open again your Eucharistic heart to us and give us new hearts, that we might love like you, live like you, and be like you.