

Commentary to the 2nd Sunday of Advent (A)



Message: Faith is a light and true faith reaches out to include others - not because of our shining goodness, but through baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

For Advent this year I am doing a series of homilies on the Light of Faith. Last week we saw why it's important to once again see that faith is a light. As Pope Francis pointed out, "once the flame of faith dies out, all other lights begin to dim."

Now, I know that many people do not see it that way. They identify faith with exclusion, fanaticism and even violence. Those things are possible, but they are perversions of faith.

True faith is always inclusive. We see in the Gospel that people came to John the Baptism from "all Judea" and "the whole region around the Jordan." John received them all - not just the good Jewish people, but also tax collectors, prostitutes and even Roman soldiers. He knows they all have something

in common: they need God and they need repentance.

John brings people together around a common ritual; he baptizes them as they confess their sins. Jesus and the Church he founded continues that practice. Pope Francis states, "The transmission of faith occurs first and foremost in baptism." And quoting Augustine, he makes a reference to infant baptism: "Parents are called not only to bring children into the world, but also to bring them to God, so that through baptism they can be reborn as children of God and receive the gift of faith."

Like John the Baptist, the Church invites everyone. We are like a body where every organ and every cell has its role. If we exclude anyone, we know that the whole body suffers.

John, however, does have a hard word for one group - the Pharisees. He calls them a bundle of snakes - a "brood of vipers." Why such strong language? Pope Francis gives the reason. They are people who "consider themselves justified before God on the basis of their own works. Such people, writes Pope Francis, "even when they obey the commandments and do good work are centered on themselves; they fail to realize that goodness comes from God." And as the pope points out, "those who live this way, who want to be the source of their own righteousness, find that the latter is soon depleted and that they are unable to keep the law."

How often do we hear people brag about their good deed and who look down on others, wind up doing the things they condemn in others? I'm sure you've noticed that when a person points his index finger at someone, he has three fingers pointed back at himself.

When you and I let go of our false self-righteousness, something beautiful happens. We open ourselves to God's forgiveness and realize that, with God's grace, we can forgive others. In *Lumen Fidei* Pope Francis writes: "Forgiveness is possible once we discover that goodness is always prior to and more powerful than evil." He adds that "forgiveness...demands time and effort, patience and commitment."

Faith makes possible forgiveness. It frees us from the cycle of accusation and self-justification. Now, I know there are people I will probably never like and there are people who make me burn inside when I remember what they did or said. Still, because of faith, I cannot resign myself to exclude even one human being. As Pope Francis says, "goodness is always prior to and more powerful than evil." Thanks be to God for that. I have more to share. If I have received forgiveness by faith then by faith, I can exclude no person.

Is this just a pipe dream? We will see that faith, like science, has a methodology - and that faith is a valid way to know truth. Not just a subjective, personal truth, but truth that can bring us together in genuine human community. I will not be giving my feeble opinions, but authentic Church teaching directly from Pope Francis - and from the Gospel itself. More next week.

So, for today, what's the message? Faith is a light and true faith reaches out to include others - not because of our shining goodness, but through baptism for the forgiveness of sins.* Amen.

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