

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Dec 6th 2015

Baptism of Repentance for the Forgiveness of Sins

All of us carry in ourselves a repugnance for injustice, and we are distressed when we personally witness or suffer divisions that wound. We long for justice where it is denied, and union of hearts and minds where there is painful division. The longing is deep. It is a holy desire. What makes it holy is that, for us, the longing pertains not just to ourselves but to all who suffer injustice and division. This puts us in global solidarity with one another and God, who desires justice and unity for all, and who sends us His Son to bring this about.

In today's Gospel Luke introduces John the Baptist with direct reference to those who perpetrated injustice and division on the Jewish people of his time.

Tiberius Caesar was the Roman Emperor, Pontius Pilate his delegate for Judea, and under him was Herod the Tetrarch who ruled Galilee. The imposition of Roman law on the Jewish people under their governance was brutal.

The High Priest Caiaphas, presiding over the Sanhedrin, was the chief religious authority of the land. Annas, the father-in-law of Caiaphas and his predecessor as High Priest, still had great influence. Together with the Pharisees referred to in the gospels, they demanded literal interpretation of the laws in scripture and strict adherence to them, thus imposing a great and oppressive burden on the Jewish people.

These were the political and religious circumstances when John the Baptist began his mission at the River Jordan. To those who came to hear him he preached a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." The ones who came were from among those suffering the brunt of the oppression imposed by Rome, Jewish leadership, and the Pharisees. John was telling them that the ultimate relief from the oppression required their own personal renewal (ritualized in the baptism John gave), repentance (sorrow for past sins and a total and radical change of outlook in our relationship with God and others), and forgiveness (anticipated in the Kingdom of God who alone can forgive sins, a Kingdom now "at hand" with the advent of Jesus Christ the Messiah).

The redemptive events which began with John in a remote corner of Judea were, by God's design, the beginning of the fulfillment of God's concern for the salvation of "all flesh" – which includes us and excludes no one. Luke underscores this theme repeatedly. His concern for all continually pushes us to break down the barriers of injustice and division that deaden our world, just as it did the world faced by John the Baptist. The story that began with John and took hold with the ministry of Jesus and the spread of the early Church in his Acts of the Apostles, is now our story. We are called to confront and deal with the injustice and divisions in our world and, joined in the Mystical Body of Christ, to replace them with the Kingdom of God.

To do this we need to renew our own "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins," just as John's disciples did. That is the purpose of Advent. The Church gives us today's gospel, then, to remind us that we have the grace to acknowledge our sins and the sins of the world, to repent and change, to enjoy God's unconditional forgiveness, and to join in the wisdom and work of our Lord.

Doing that, we fulfill what John the Baptist prophesied when he quoted Isaiah in today's gospel:

“Make straight his paths, and every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low. The winding roads shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

Kevin Kersten, S.J.-Creighton University's Law School Chaplain/Communications Studies Dep