

Gospel: Mk 1: 1-8

Every year during Advent we hear from two of Scripture's great prophets. Most Advent Sundays and on Christmas as well the first reading is from Isaiah telling us of the coming of the Messiah, of his kingdom, and what we need to do to get ready for his coming. In the Gospels for the second and third Sunday we hear the call of John the Baptist, the last of Scripture's prophets telling the people to reform their lives and of the need to prepare for the coming of Christ.

Many people don't see John as a prophet, but that's because they fail to understand the prophet's role. Prophets are not merely foretellers of the future. The best description I have heard is that prophets are the mouthpiece of God here on earth. God doesn't speak with a booming voice from heaven telling us what to do even though He certainly could if he chose to. Rather He uses individuals, many of them reluctantly, to get his message of love for neighbor and living in right relationship across.

In addition to being the one to herald the imminent coming of the Lord, John certainly fulfilled his role as a prophet. He was fearless in his warnings to the people, calling the delegation sent by the chief priests a brood of vipers. Actually, that's a cleaned up version of what he said, but I won't repeat the literal translation here. He also blasted Herod Antipas for his relationship with his brother's wife, a warning that John knew could, and eventually did, cost him his life.

Yet there was something about John that attracted people to him. As Scripture tells us, people from all over Judea and even from Jerusalem came to him to be baptized and acknowledge their sins. For many of the people this would be a journey of several days, and most would have come on foot. How many of us would make such a journey to go to Confession? A voice in the wilderness, yes, but a voice that was heard throughout the kingdom, and a voice that we need to still hear today crying out "Reform your lives. Prepare the way of the Lord."

How do many people today prepare for the coming of Christ? Certainly most of us decorate our homes. (Fran and I have already started.) We set up a Christmas tree and maybe add some additional decorations both inside and out. And that's fine, especially if we remember the significance of the evergreen tree as symbolizing God's unchangingness and that the lights on the tree represent Christ, our Light. As St. John tells us of a light that shines in the darkness which the darkness has not overcome, the true light which enlightens everyone that was coming into the world.

Our culture though has taken over the Christmas season. Decorations have all become so secularized. Several years ago I walked through our neighborhood and I saw two nativity scenes besides ours. There were, however six or seven Homer Simpson Santas stuffing a donut into his mouth while clutching the donut box to his chest. If you were to

walk through your neighborhood as we get closer to Christmas you'll probably be able to count more Santas, reindeer, and penguins (and when did penguins become part of a Christmas scene?) than you will angels, shepherds, magi, or nativity scenes.

And it's not only Christmas decorations where our culture has become secularized. When one of the companies I worked for published its holiday calendar I noticed a new holiday. It was called Winter Holiday. It just happened to fall on December 25. There was also a Spring Holiday that happened to fall on Good Friday. When I mentioned this to HR I was told that we need to be sensitive to other religions, and I said if anyone has a problem with having Christmas as a holiday then they can come to work that day. I was then informed that my attitude was not appropriate for a manager. I didn't like that comment, and the woman in HR certainly didn't like my next reply.

If John the Baptist was alive today, I believe he'd tell us to stop this madness. I imagine he would tell us we need to decorate our hearts, not only our houses. We should decorate our hearts with acts of charity and self-giving toward Christ's struggling brothers and sisters. Only two weeks ago Jesus told us whatever we do for them, we do for him and the ramifications of our actions or inactions. How many of us have already forgotten our Lord's uncomfortable message?

Now for a shameless commercial plug. The Knights of Columbus are selling poinsettias after the Masses this weekend. For only ten dollars you can have one of them to help decorate your home. But this can also be a small decoration for your heart as well because the plants are not worth ten dollars. The Knights use the profits from the sale to support the council's pro-life activities which can give a child the gift of life, or at least a better life. Here's a way to make it a real special decoration for your heart with a big bow on it. Just give the man a twenty or more and tell him to keep the change.

May this Advent be a time of spiritual renewal for us. May we respond to the words of Isaiah and John to prepare the way of the Lord, not externally, but here in our hearts, in our souls. Be ready to welcome that light that shines in the darkness and follow it throughout the year, no need to wait for Christmas – do it now. And if we are already following that light ask God to make it glow brighter. That's the light that will lead us to eternal life. This Advent, let's decorate our hearts as well as our homes. After all, what good is a decorated house if the hearts living in it are undecorated and unchanged?