

**A Sermon Preached by  
Fr. Edwin Smith for Advent 3, Year C  
December 13th, 2009 at St. Thomas, Menasha, Wisconsin**

Each morning, I read the paper in anticipation of an article that will prompt someone in the congregation to ask a question. This past week or so there have been two such articles.

The first dealt with the election of a Suffragan Bishop in California. If you have questions about that, there is an insert in today's bulletin which explains how a person becomes a bishop. In the case in point, that process is not yet complete.

The second article reported on research by the Pew Foundation regarding spirituality and religious practices. It is too extensive to go into here, but suffice to say that it raised many more questions than it answered. So much for sociological research!

What it did do was shine the spotlight on the need for us to do a "checklist" of our faith periodically. I think that is what John the Baptist was doing in today's Gospel lesson.

Wouldn't you have liked to have been there when John the Baptist roared at the crowd, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" Go John! Let 'em have it!

The problem, of course, is that what John says is not meant just for that crowd in that place at that time. I suspect it is meant for you and me, too!

If you were listening to the lessons this morning, the Old Testament passage, the Psalm, and the Epistle all sound like the good news. In contrast, our Gospel for this morning sounds like the bad news!

John the Baptist is no smoothie. His words are harsh, scarcely calculated to entice seekers into a deeper relationship with God. On the basis of this message, he would cause many seminary faculty members to shudder.

But, what he said was appropriate to the crowd to which it was addressed. Many of them had come to be baptized simply to escape eternal punishment. Now, that is not necessarily a bad motivation, but they failed to turn to God for salvation. They just wanted John to dunk them in the water so that they would not spend eternity in the wrong place! There was no intention on their part to begin living a new, different, changed life. To them, John's baptism was sort of a vaccination against eternal damnation.

It makes one wonder. How many are baptized, confirmed, and attend services religiously, without ever intending to live a life which bears fruit? While it is not listed among the seven deadly sins, I sometimes think complacency should be at the very top for Christians. It brings to mind the church in Laodicea in the book of Revelation. Remember? The church that was neither hot nor cold, merely tepid – lukewarm.

We become too easily satisfied with where we are on our spiritual journey.

Thomas Merton wrote that "The advent mystery is the beginning of the end of all in us that is not yet Christ." It is absolutely essential for our growth as Christians that we take time periodically to take stock of "All that is in us that is not Christ."

While individual confession has lost whatever popularity it ever had in the Episcopal Church, that does not alter the fact that confession and a changed life are inseparable. Those who came to John weren't ready to go that far. Sin was still too attractive, and they wanted to stand on their ancestry for justification. They came from good stock, descendants of Abraham. John told them that wasn't enough. Faith isn't inherited. Religious practices, maybe. But, faith, never.

I wonder. Does that apply to us? How many think that the "faith of our fathers" will save us? How glibly we talk of someone coming from "a good Christian family," as if that somehow

inoculated them against sin. No one has ever been saved by someone else's faith. My relationship with Jesus Christ and my faith in his saving grace is mine. I may have been pointed in the right direction, but ultimately, Christianity is a religion of personal decision, not family heritage, and we make a very big mistake when we think otherwise

When the crowd heard John's message, they must have been stunned. We know that, at the very least, they were moved to ask what they could do. And John's response gave them three things--three outward signs that they could exhibit that would show a life changed: share what you have with those who do not have; whatever your job, do it fairly and well; and, be content with what God has given you.

I wonder, what do our lives reflect. What do others see when they look at us?

Now, I think John chose his words carefully. He wasn't simply speaking about stewardship, here, as important as that may be. "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." the operative word, here, is must. John did not propose this as an option, but as a necessity.

I have heard it said that if every person shared his or her food with their neighbor, no one would ever go hungry. Now, I don't know the logistics of that, but I do know that many of us have far more clothes than we can ever wear. I know I do. And, I will admit to having more food than I need (that is a safe thing for me to say, since it is so obvious). But, do we routinely look among our possessions to find things we can give to those less fortunate, or are we faced more by the need to find space for more clothes, or a natural instinct to clean for spring?

If we really thought about clothing our less fortunate neighbors, the next time we bought some clothes, we might consider getting two of everything and give one set away. And when we buy our groceries, we might some extra, rather than waiting for the expiration date to come near and then bring something for the food pantry?

I wonder how many of us look at the way we do our jobs as an opportunity to exhibit a changed life? Would someone know you are a Christian by your work habits? How many Christians give more than a fair day's work for a day's wage?

John spoke to the hated tax collectors and told them they needed to be fair. He told the soldiers of the occupation forces the same thing. Most of us aren't tax collectors, but are we fair in our labors? If we are employers, are we fair with our employees? Do they know we are Christians by our fairness?

Lastly, John told his audience to be satisfied with their wages. I wonder, how many who claim to be Christians are truly content with what they have been given--not just their wages, but with their placelot in life, with the house they live in; the car they drive, or don't have; the loose change in their pockets?

John called the crowd to repentance--to changed lives--and, he calls us, too. In one of my favorite meditations by Canon Charles Fulton, entitled, "What on earth has happened," asks us to consider the initials, BGW, which could stand for "Before George Washington" or AMJ, which would be "After Michael Jordan."

Both sets of initials would speak to special groups of people. Think of BCE, which means "Before the Common Era," because Jews do not recognize the messiah-ship of Jesus. However, none of these initials bear the impact of B.C. and A.D.--before and after Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Christ has come. He visited planet earth like a meteor from outer space that struck with such an impact that the world has never been the same. His birth was only the beginning. When the very worst could be mustered against him and he was crucified as a common criminal, he continued to

change the course of the whole human race. His resurrection has torn the curtain of our sin and has opened to us life everlasting. Jesus came to seek and to save all humankind.

In this advent time, it is appropriate to ask:

“What on earth has happened in your life because of Jesus?”