

Third Sunday of Advent

I suppose all of us have different ways to help us to remember the things we have to do each day. Many create a “to do” list and then have much satisfaction in crossing off the things on the list as they get done. My phone and iPad have a thing called reminders. But what is often harder to put down on a list are things that we have to do that call us to change in some way. Most of us don’t like these kinds of lists, because they make us uncomfortable. It often happens for me that some of the things that need to be on that list pop up when I am quietly praying.

Today we meet John the Baptist again. The people who were coming to him to be baptised were asking him to help them create their “to do” lists. Luke tells us that all the people were asking John, “What must I do?”

It is not surprising that as Luke tells the story, John called people to a repentance that involved being generous and just. Those who had more than they needed for themselves were told to share what they had. Tax collectors were told to collect only what they were entitled to collect in tax. Soldiers were told to be content with their pay. Soldiers were in the habit of adding to their pay packets by taking bribes and demanding payment from the people that they were employed to protect.

Each of us could come to John today and ask the same question, “What must I do?” John would act like a mirror for us inviting us to look at ourselves and to see what needs to be put on our “to do” lists when it comes to changing things in our lives. He would want us to especially reflect upon how we are acting towards other people. He would want us to notice if we had grown selfish and had closed our ears and our hearts to those who have asked our help. When life is reasonably comfortable for us it is easy to believe that we don’t have anything more than we need. If we ever have to move house, that is a time that we come to realise that we have accumulated much more than we will ever need. I greatly admire those who have learnt to live simply.

Some of us have found that a good way to give Christmas presents to our families and those who are close to us is to give a Global Gift through Caritas Australia or through some other charity. The card that those people receive will read something like this. “Your Christmas gift this year is very special. I decided to make a donation on your behalf, to Caritas Australia. My feeling is that this gift embraces the true spirit of Christmas and reminds us of God’s love for all humanity. I hope it brings you joy too.”

John would want us to look closely at anything that smells of injustice. It is often only when other people point things out to us that we notice that what we are doing may be unjust. That can be hard. It can be harder when somebody then asks the question, “What are you going to do about it?”

Advent is a good time for us to look at our relationships with others in our world and also those much closer to home. It is a time for reconciliation. It’s a good time to experience God’s forgiveness through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. We will have a Reconciliation service this Thursday evening at Our Lady of Mercy. Advent is also a good time to seek forgiveness and healing from those we may have hurt. It’s a time to pray that we may be forgiven by them. Even our best efforts to heal broken relationships are not always successful. We have to rely upon God to work in our hearts and in the hearts of those who are at odds with us.

St. Paul reminds us that the work of reconciliation is the work of God. He tells us today that he wants us to be happy in the Lord. “Let your tolerance be evident to everyone: the Lord is very near.” When we truly desire reconciliation and ask God for it then our prayers will be answered, “And that peace of God, which is so much greater than we can understand, will guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus.”

When we do open our hearts to the Lord and to what he wants to do in us, we experience a peacefulness that is difficult to describe. It might even get close to that exuberant joy that is expressed today in our reading from the Prophet Zephaniah. “Shout for joy, daughter of Zion, Israel shout aloud! Rejoice, exult with all your heart, daughter of Jerusalem. The Lord, the king of Israel is in your midst, you have no more evil to fear.” This is a great reading for the day that we light our third Advent candle, the pink candle of Joy.

Getting back to our lists of things to do, have we ever thought that God might have a “to do” list longer than any list that we might have? God still has much to do in each one of before we come to that perfection that he desires of us. I suppose I have been a bit more conscious of that as I spend a bit of time looking back over the year. I know that I can still be a better priest than I am now. I can be more prayerful, more attentive, more compassionate than I am. I can be more generous with my time. I’m sure that those sort of things are on God’s “to do” list when God looks at the work to be done in me. But I know that they will only get done if I want them to happen. They will only get done if they are on my “to do” list too. That’s part of my Advent prayer this year.