

Advent III, Year C
December 13, 2009

There's a lapel button I've seen a couple of times, and I saw the bumper sticker not long ago. It's concise and it's clear. What it says is: "Jesus is coming back—look busy". An interesting thought, and hardly one we want to hear as Christmas gets really close, and there are only eleven shopping days left.

None the less, we hear John the Baptist at his most Baptist today, and I want to look at just one piece of what's going on with that. John is preaching repentance, and he's doing a really powerful job of it. He preaches so well that the people listen, (that's scary for any preacher), they listen, they believe, and they call him on it. OK, they say, we don't want the axe laid to the root of us, we repent, really. Now, what should we do about it; what does this repentance look like? What are the details?

That's a really good Advent question, both then and now. I still hear it—"what are we supposed to do?" I figure folks back then, pretty much like folks today, were expecting from John a sort of official list of 'repentance things to do'—a bunch of holy busy work to keep them occupied, and to give them a reason to wear their own button: "the messiah is coming—and I'm busy."

What John says to all of this is fascinating. First of all, he doesn't give any general rules—he doesn't say, "everybody who repents has to do this, and this, and this, and this, and this, and so on". For one thing, he doubtless assumed that folks knew the basics. But there's a lot more than that going on. Instead of giving a list, John says that what you are supposed to do will grow from your life, from where you are and from who you are. Your duty will be a function of your situation in life.

First of all, John says, if you are a person who has more than you need, you will then have a duty to share what you have with those who don't have all they need. That's something repentance looks like. It looks like reflecting on where you are in the world—do you have, literally or metaphorically, two coats.

If you do, then that situation presents you with a moral imperative; it shows you something that you have to do. Since not everyone is in that situation, not everyone has that particular duty. But this is what repentance looks like for people who are in that situation.

John then talks with the two most unpopular groups of Jews in Palestine—tax collectors and soldiers. The tax collectors worked for Rome, the soldiers, most likely, for Herod, the puppet king of Rome. They were, basically, the scum of the earth, as popular as telephone solicitors, and as respectable as mafia hit-men. These are the folks who asked John what they were supposed to do. (And remember, John was an anti-Roman nationalist who was also on the outs (big-time) with Herod and his whole family.) So the people who asked this probably expected John to say something really drastic (and nasty), like: ‘The best thing you can do is drop dead’, or, at the very least, ‘You gotta quit your job and do something that decent people can stomach.’

Instead, John told the soldiers to be good soldiers, to cultivate the virtues, and avoid the temptations, of their profession—and to seek to be content and productive within the finest traditions of that profession. He said essentially the same thing to the tax collectors, who were even less popular than the soldiers.

Notice that he didn’t tell the soldiers not to be soldiers, or the tax collectors not to be tax collectors. He didn’t tell anyone they had to be someone else, or become like him; and he didn’t give a single soul a bunch of busy-work. Instead, he said that a life of repentance begins with exactly the real life you have, with exactly the situation in which you find yourselves, with exactly the person you are right now. You begin here—you don’t have to go someplace else to start. The point isn’t to look busy. The point is to transform the life you have.

This means, among other things, that the Christian life, which includes the life of repentance, is not somebody else's life; it isn't a life that's distant and different from ours. The Christian life we are called to live is not Mother Theresa's life, or St. Francis' life, or the life of Peter or Paul.

That was *their* life to live. The Christian life we are called to live is *our* life, our present lives—lived differently, and transformed by the intention of living them wholly to the glory of God.

Another thing that John's response suggests is that we look at our lives from two perspectives: the first one has to do with *what we do*—our professions or jobs, those regular tasks and responsibilities we have. Are we educators, or cooks, or engineers, whatever? That's the first perspective. The second has to do with *who we are*, with our situation in life. Are we single or married, retired or working, healthy or ailing, (I've already mentioned having possessions or not having possessions), parents or children {or both}, young or old {or neither}? Who are we? That's the second one. It is these two together that give content to what a life of repentance looks like.

Think about it. What are the duties, the temptations, the virtues and the excellences of who *you* are—of what you do, and of your situation in life? John told soldiers to be good, morally good, soldiers. (They already knew what that meant, but he filled some of it in for them.) What does it mean, what does it look like, for you to be a good you, to be a morally good you, in terms of both parts, the doing and the being? What's involved in that? This, John the Baptist suggests, is what you should do if you hear the word of God, and repent.

I suspect that is plenty enough for any of us. I suspect that our present lives are likely to contain all the moral challenges, all the opportunities to discern and develop virtues, all the temptations to resist, all the vices to discover and transform, all the occasions for holiness and for growth, for generosity and for renewal, that we will ever need.

Again, when it comes to the moral life, to living out our Christianity, we don't have to go somewhere else to start—we start right here. And we don't have a bunch of new things to do—just what we've always have been doing, laid before us now not as the drudgery of another day, but as the gift of God for our spiritual and moral growth. So, we have no reason to postpone getting serious about our faith until something or another changes. It is precisely in our dealing with something or another that we are to discover what it means for us, now, to get serious about our faith.

That's the moral challenge John the Baptist gives us. It really doesn't have anything to do with looking busy, and it isn't about what anybody else is or isn't doing. There isn't a single list everybody gets. Instead, it's about us, personally, about who we are and what we do. It is precisely (and only) there that we will find the details, and the challenges, of what we ought to do—and it is precisely there that we will find the grace and direction to live that out, and make that happen.