

A few years before the birth of Christ there was a somewhat cynical man who sought out every rabbi he could find and always asked them the same question. Can you explain to me the entire Torah while standing on one foot? As some of you may know, the Torah is the collection of Jewish law, so this man was asking rabbis to explain to him the entire Mosaic law, while standing on one foot.

Now the rabbis knew this man was mocking them. Some of them just laughed at him and asked him to leave. Some of them responded more angrily and threw him out. But finally he came to Rabbi Hillel.

Rabbi Hillel was renowned for his wisdom. Many stories, like this one, have grown up around him. So this man comes to Rabbi Hillel and asks him “Can you explain to me the whole of the Torah while standing on one foot?” The rabbi did not laugh at him, or throw him out. He sat thoughtfully for a moment. Then he stood up raised one foot and said, “what you yourself despise, do not do to another. The rest is explanation, go and learn.”

When Jesus was asked, “What is the greatest commandment?” He responded that the greatest commandment is to love God, but then He continued, that the second is like it, to love your neighbor as yourself.

In today’s Gospel the crowds gather around John the Baptist, to hear him preach. To answer their question, what should we do, how should we live? They have come to recognize John as a Holy Man, a prophet of God. There is a sense of anticipation in the air. The people are filled with expectation. And what does he tell them?

He tells them to be generous, to share their food and clothing with the poor. He tells them to be just and honest in their business dealings. He tells them to be content and hardworking. In short he preaches to them to love each other as much as they love themselves. He reminds them of the value of justice and humility: we are not to take unfair advantage of anyone, and we are to help those in need. This is nothing new or radical, it is simple basic moral teaching. John, Rabbi Hillel, and Jesus, all preach the same message. And it touches the people so deeply that they are ready to accept John as the Messiah of prophecy. Because John lived what he preached.

Think for a moment how different the world would be if everyone followed these simple moral guidelines. And think how open our souls would be to God's grace if we considered the needs of others at least as much as we consider our own.

John is announcing the coming of the Savior, the Anointed One, the Lord of Life and history. He is telling people how they can come to experience "the peace of God that surpasses all understanding." The destination is wisdom, joy, and eternal life, but the road that takes us there is paved with basic morality. And even two thousand years ago, living this type of life, treating others as you would like to be treated, was so extraordinary that people begin to ask if John might be the Christ.

If you go to Barnes & Noble and look for books on spirituality, you won't find many books written by Christian saints and popes, those are in the "Christianity" section, as if "spirituality" and "Christianity" are somehow completely different

subjects. What you will find are titles dealing with “inner harmony” and “white magic” and even “the great secret of the universe.” And if you look inside these so-called spirituality books, you will find almost nothing about morality or your interactions with others. Instead it’s all about you. It’s all about physical and mental techniques designed to bring your inner self into harmony with the cosmos. And that can be very seductive. The suggestion that you can achieve inner peace, harmony, and happiness just by practicing a few simple techniques is a lot easier than repenting from sin, growing in spiritual maturity and leading a moral life.

Many times people reject Christianity not because its’ theology is too difficult to understand but because its’ moral demands are too basic. Too many people would rather engage in external esoteric rituals, than change from within. But that new-age glamour is just an illusion. It cannot transform us. It cannot nourish our soul. The real path that leads to fruitful life now and for all eternity is a steep and narrow one, Jesus Himself told us this. And the gate to that path is basic moral virtue. And God has left instructions for us to follow, not only written in stone and given to Moses, but also written in our own hearts.

St. John the Baptist lived what he preached to such a degree that he lost his life because he refused to condone moral compromise.

Christianity is unpopular. Not because it doesn’t make sense but because it is morally demanding. G.K. Chesterton said “Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried.”

So the message is not new. We all know what we are supposed to do. We all know what the right thing is. Everyone agrees that the call of St. John the Baptist to moral uprightness is a good one. Would anyone argue that honesty, justice, hard work, responsibility, and generosity are steps along the path to hell? So if we acknowledge the goodness of the moral life, why do we find it so difficult to follow? Why is it so hard to live up to? Why do we continually fall into temptation, whether it is impatience, greed, lust, or laziness?

It is difficult because we are not on this journey alone. We try to follow Christ towards spiritual maturity; we try to keep to the narrow path. But there are enemies lying in wait to trip us up. Scripture can help us identify three of them.

First there is the world. We live in a fallen world that has convinced itself it can get along just fine without God. This is what we call secularism. And like the rivers of Babylon the secular world wants to draw us along in its wake, away from God, away from the truly meaningful life of moral virtue and into its own currents of selfishness and sin.

Second there is our own fallen human nature. Because of original sin we are attracted to both good and evil, and usually at the same time. We tend to think of our own wants and desires just as much, if not more than, the wants and desires of others. This is what theologians call concupiscence. Concupiscence is a contradiction within our souls, which causes us to be attracted simultaneously to both good and evil.

And third there is the devil. The devil uses the secular nature of the world, as well as our tendency to be attracted to sin, and exploits them. That is how he drives a wedge between us and God.

The devil magnifies the world's seductions and plays upon our selfishness, trying to weaken our friendship with Christ by leading us into sin. And the Devil has been hard at work.

I read a story a couple of weeks ago about a sermon given by a chaplain at a Christian University. The sermon was much like this homily, mostly about the need to love and care for each other above our own wants and desires.

The sermon had a tremendous impact upon one particular student who felt he had not loved others enough. Now the student could have resolved to be more giving and charitable to others, but he didn't do that. He could have prayed to God for the grace to put the needs of others above his own selfishness, but he didn't do that either.

Instead he complained to the university administration that the chaplain made him feel bad about himself, and so the chaplain should be reprimanded for giving that sermon. This is the fruit of the tree that the devil has been nourishing for a very long time.

So how do we fight against this evil trinity of the world, our own selfishness, and the devil? What do we do? How should we live?

First of all we must renounce selfishness. In the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ we must renounce this unclean spirit that has become a part of us through Original Sin; break the bonds that tie us to it, and send it to the foot of the cross. Our Lord can handle it from there.

And second, listen to John the Baptist speaking to us across thousands of years: Turn to our savior and trust in His Grace. “Shout for joy!” today’s first reading tells us: “The Lord... has turned away your enemies... Fear not... be not discouraged! The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a mighty savior...”

That’s what we celebrate today. The third Sunday in Advent is called Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete is Latin for rejoice, and the first word of the entrance antiphon is just that, rejoice. Father wears rose colored vestments, not as a symbol of a lessening of our Advent preparations, but rather as a reminder that the entire season of our preparation is a season of joy. During this Advent, we welcome our savior who frees us from sin and selfishness, we rejoice at the coming of the Lord.