

3rd Sunday of Advent, C

When Jimmy Carter first became president of the United States, he initiated a program of visiting in people's homes. I don't know how these people were chosen, but they were not the prominent and the powerful – the kind of people one would expect to host a president. They were, instead, farmers and factory workers – just ordinary people like you and me.

I have wondered some about those people one the advance preparation they made for that visit. Hopefully, they did not put in some superficial show. That would have defeated the entire purpose. But one thing is almost certain – they did an extra good job of cleaning house. No sweeping dirt under the carpet or stuffing things in the closet, not when the President is coming. This kind of visit calls for special house cleaning.

The thing that started me to thinking of that is Advent. This is the time of the year when we celebrate the coming of Christ, not just in the past but in the present, not just to Bethlehem but to our town and our homes and our lives.

I wonder how we would react if we really took that seriously. Suppose you knew that Christ was going to literally and physically visit your home during this advent season. You are not sure which day; but his coming is certain, of that you can be sure. How would you handle that? What would you do?

That thought is somewhat the theme of today's Gospel reading. John had been preaching to the crowds, telling them that Messiah was at hand. Those who believed his message began to ask, "What ought we to do?" And John had some specific and practical answers to that question. He said, "Let the man who has two coats give to him who has none. The man who has food should do the same." He told the tax collectors to exact nothing over and above their fixed amount. And he told the soldiers not to threaten people or lie about them but to be contented with their pay.

Those answers should give you and me a clue as to how we should prepare for the coming of Christ.

For one thing, they tell us that outward and showy things mean nothing. We would be wasting our time and money if we tried to decorate our lives in order to impress our Lord. Should you know that he was coming to your home this Advent, there would be no reason for buying new curtains or giving the house a fresh coat of paint. Such things may be a necessary part of beautifying and maintaining your home, but as an attempt to impress Christ they would be an exercise in uselessness.

I remember that at one time Jesus talked about some people whose lives were like "whitewashed tombs," which on the outside appear beautiful, but within they are full of dead men's bones and all kinds of uncleanness.

And there is another verse that says, “Man looks on the outward appearance, but God looks on the heart.”

These is what John was saying to his audience and is also saying to you and me. The word that he used for it was “repentance”, and that is an essential part of our preparation for Christmas. The word literally means to change once mind and that express itself in a change of life.

John made two specific applications of his message. One was a call for those who have more than they need to share with those who do not have enough. I wonder what would happen if we took that seriously and tried to do something about it. One thing is certain – it would make a significant difference in the way some of us live. I don’t know what all the answers are to economic imbalance in our world and in our nation. I do know that we cannot be indifferent to it and be comfortable in the presence of Christ at the same time.

His other application was a call for honesty in personal and business dealings. He said that specifically to soldiers and tax collectors. Both of those groups were in positions where they could take advantage of others for their personal enrichment; and because they could, they did. Tax collectors collected more than the amount due and put the extra in their pockets. Soldiers used their power to extort money and supplement their wages. And John reminded them that such conduct would not stand the test in presence of Christ.

There are those who still need that message today. The temptation to take advantage of others did not vanish with the first century. The forms have changed, but the principle is the same. Using other people to our personal advantage is still unacceptable with Christ, however respectable we may make it appear.

So, repentance is an essential part of Advent. If we really look for his coming, we will make some changes in the way that we are living.
Amen.