

### *Second Sunday of Advent, Year A*

One of the more famous speeches of this century was made on August 28, 1963, in Washington, D.C. by Martin Luther King. Standing in front of the Lincoln Memorial, he told the crowd of 200,000 people, “I have a dream, that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed. I have a dream that one day the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave - owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

When he had finished, the crowd sat for a few moments in stunned silence and then exploded in a delirium of celebration. That speech united the millions of black Americans and pumped new life into an already - active civil rights movement. But in a deeper sense, it expressed the hopes of the human race. People of all nations have always dreamed of a better world, a world without war, a world where people of all colors and beliefs could live together in peace. The Greek philosopher, Plato, dreamed of such a world and called it “The Republic.” Karl Marx wished - for a classless society based on communism, where everyone would receive an equal share of goods and services. The Hebrew prophets dreamed of a coming kingdom in which truth, justice, and peace would reign supreme.

Every person here this morning shares or has shared some of those same dreams. We are sick of the stupidity of war. We are exhausted by man's inhumanity to man. We are tired of crime and violence. We long for a world of peace and righteousness, where people and nations settle their differences through cooperation instead of conflict.

But many, I am afraid, have stopped believing that such a world is even possible. Many more are deeply discouraged. Though still believing in a better world, they feel helpless to do anything about it.

The problems are too big, and circumstances are too far out of control. All we can do, it seems, is wait, and wish, and hope.

Well, today's gospel reading has a message for that. It proclaims the imminent arrival of the reign of God. The messenger was John the Baptist. This strange preacher suddenly appeared in the desert of Judea, telling the people, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." His message was short and simple, but it contained a logical sequence - first, reformed lives; and second, the reign of God. First, better people; and then a better world.

That makes sense, doesn't it? So the message for us is: If you want a better world, start with yourself. While you wait, reform your own life.

John is reminding us that the first responsibility of every person is himself or herself. In other words, my primary mission in life is not to change the world, to save the world, or even to serve the world. My

primary mission is to become the best “me” that I possibly can, and yours is the same.

Now that may sound strange, coming from a priest; but it needs to be said. Until we tackle the challenge of ourselves, we are ill - equipped to tackle the many challenges of society. It is complete hypocrisy to think that we can change the world, unless, first of all we are willing to change our own lives.

Our scripture reading tells of certain men who were drawn to the ministry of John. They heard his preaching. They saw the great crowds of people. They felt the excitement in the air, and thought perhaps the reign of God might really be at hand. So they decided to jump on the bandwagon, just in case. But John would have no part of their scheme. He detected their lack of moral seriousness and confronted them with this challenge: “You children of vipers produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance.”

Brothers and sisters, that message is intended for you and me. We deceive ourselves if we think God is going to hand us a better world on a silver platter. That is patent foolishness. Not even God can do that. The only way we will ever get a better world is for you and me, and others just like us, to become better people. John’s message is clear - the first responsibility of every person is himself or herself.

He is also reminding us that all the moral problems of the world are really just the moral failures of people.

We sometimes speak of society as if it were some sort of separate, living organism - individuals on the one hand and society on the other. Well, such is not the case at all. A society is nothing more or less than a group of people living together in some kind of relationship. Whatever is wrong with that society is the accumulated result of whatever is wrong with the people who compose it. If we live in a cruel, greedy and violent world, it is only because there are cruel, greedy, and violent people.

And this is not to deny that many individuals are victims of society. The child born out of marriage and grows up in poverty, whose only playground is a back - alley, and whose only heroes are the members of a street - gang, are a victims of society. I am not forgetting that nor losing my compassion for it. I am simply reminding us of who and what society is. It is not something unclear, something out there. Society is people. Society is you and me. And when we speak of what society is doing to people, we are really speaking of what we are doing to each other.

Ultimately, it all comes back to individual lives. Whatever is wrong with society is nothing more or less than the accumulated result of whatever is wrong with us. And if we ever hope to change it, we have to start with ourselves.

For the most part, you and I are inclined to think of the world in terms of what it does to us. Circumstances, it seems, are in control; and the best any of us can do is deal with them. And there is a great deal of

truth to that feeling, but it is not the entire truth. What the world does to us is only half of the matter; what we do to the world is the rest of it.

It would be comforting, I suppose, to settle back into some sort of fatalism and blame the world for all our problems; but it would not be entirely true. In a very real sense, the exact opposite is true. We are to blame for the world's problems. The world does not pollute its own air and water; people do. The world does not fight senseless wars; people do. The world does not cause poverty; people do. The world does not foster prejudice and hatred; people do.

However it may appear, you and I are not the prisoners of some kind of impersonal fate. Most of the problems of this world do not just happen; they are caused. And each of us must shoulder his or her part of the blame.

We say that we want a better world. In some sense, we expect a better world. But while we are waiting, we should go to work on our own lives. The only way to get a better world is to build it out of better people. John said it centuries ago, at the Jordan River: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." And today I say after Him at Mississippi river: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." **Amen.**