

Well, the kids have been at it again. Recently our 4th grade C.C.D. teacher asked her students if they would give a million dollars to the missions. They all shouted, “Yes!” Well, would you give \$1,000 to Fr. Eschbach to take care of the Church? Again, they shouted, “Yes!” Would you give \$100 to help the poor in our community? Again, they shouted, “Yes!” Ok, finally would you give five dollars to buy candy for the class. Again, they all shouted, “Yes!” except Johnny. The teacher asked, “Johnny, why didn’t you say yes like everyone else.” Johnny stammered, “Because I have \$5.00.”

So, our teacher changed her line of questioning. She asked, “If I sold my house, my car, all my possessions and all my money, and gave everything to the poor, would I go to heaven?” The kids said, “No!” “How about if I cleaned the church every day; helped my neighbor rake her leaves, clean her house; and drove her to her doctors’ appointments, would I go to heaven then? Again, the children said, “No!” Finally, she asked, “Well then what do I have to do to go to heaven?” There was a long silence. Then, a young man in the back of the class asked rather gently, “Don’t you have to be dead first?”

But, of course, children aren’t the only ones who get their priorities somewhat mixed up. Recently I visited a cemetery and saw a tombstone that left no doubt as to the priority of the person who lay beneath it. Below his name and the dates of his birth and death was carved the inscription, “Bowled 300 in 1982”. That apparently was the high point of his life.

Then, there’s the woman who browsed through a yard sale. She said to the homeowner, “My husband’s really going to be mad when he finds out I stopped here.” The homeowner said, “Oh, he’ll get over it when he sees all the bargains you found.” “I don’t know,” the woman said, “he broke his leg and he’s waiting for me to get home to take him to the emergency room.” Obviously, the woman’s priority wasn’t her husband.

Finally, I heard of a teen who was walking home when two men came up behind him and one said, “Give us your wallet. I have a gun and I will shoot you.” “No!” said the teenager. The thief said, “Don’t you understand English. I said I have a gun and I’m not afraid to use it. Give me your wallet.” “No!” said the teen. Again, the thief said, “You’re dead now if you don’t give up your wallet.” The teen vehemently said, “No!” and kept on walking. A few steps later he turned around to see his would-be-assailants running away. Later a friend asked him, “Weren’t you scared?” “Of course I was scared,” said the youth, “but my new learner’s permit was in my wallet.”

My point is we all have different ideas of what’s important in life.

Today, My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, the Gospel introduces us to a man who was totally focused. He knew what was important in his life. He had but one priority. He didn’t care about where he lived—a cave in a desert. He didn’t care about the clothes he wore—an animal skin. He didn’t even care about what he ate—locusts and wild honey.

John the Baptist had but one mission that was central to his life—to prepare the world for the coming of Christ. That’s what he was born for. That’s what he lived for.

Of course, that’s also our task as well. It is the work of every Christian. That’s why we were born—to prepare the world for Christ. But that’s so easy to forget, especially as we prepare for the celebration of Christ’s birth.

There is so much else to prepare for as Christmas approaches--Gifts to buy and wrap; Cards to be sent; Parties to enjoy; Trees to trim; Lights to be hung; Food to prepare; Cookies to bake. Somehow we get all caught up in these wonderful distractions that we lose focus, we lose sight of our mission, the reason we were born into this life—to prepare the world for the coming of Christ.

John’s basic message to prepare people for the coming of Christ was to repent. He was speaking to people much like the people preachers throughout Christendom speak today. People who no longer believe in sin. Let’s face it! The word *SIN* has lost it’s sting. It is, at best, the punch line of a tired joke.

Yet, domestic violence takes the lives of thousands of women each year, and physically and emotionally scars even thousands of more children. More than half the nation’s children live in single parent homes. Addictions continue to soar. So many of our young people wander around without a moral compass, even as our mass media spews out violence, obscenity, and explicit portrayals of sexual depravity. Could it be that our society is in even greater need of a baptism of repentance than that to which John the Baptist spoke?

This season of Advent is a time for us to re-focus on the primary mission of our lives as Christians—to prepare the world for the coming of Christ. But, as the old adage suggests, “You can’t give, what you ain’t got.” Before we prepare the world for the coming of Christ, we have to prepare our own hearts.

As you know I have just returned from a five-day Retreat. I wanted to go on Retreat especially at this time to re-focus on my mission—to prepare you for the Coming of Christ. The first days of my Retreat I was led to examine what I wanted to achieve—to cleanse my heart so I could more easily surrender myself to the Will of God. Then, I was led to repent of my sins—the obstacles and barriers that I erected within myself that prevented surrendering myself to God. I confessed these sins in sacramental confession and was washed by the beautiful words of absolution: “God, the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son has reconciled the whole world to Himself, and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of our sins; through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from all your sins in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Finally, I was led to achieve an inner peace—a peace that the world cannot give.

I am firmly convinced that it is only with that inner peace that I, or any of us, can focus on and accomplish our primary mission in life—to prepare the world for the coming of Christ. More immediately, I believe it is only with such inner peace that we can truly enjoy the celebration of Christmas.

If I may, please allow me to describe for you what I have come to see as signs or symptoms of inner peace:

It is a sense of freedom from guilt and shame and failure and weakness;

It is a tendency to think and act spontaneously with joy rather than from fear based on past experiences;

It is an unmistakable ability to enjoy each moment;

It is a loss of interest in judging other people, as well as yourself;

It is a loss of interest in interpreting the actions of others;

It is a loss of interest in conflict and a loss of interest in worry;

It is frequent, overwhelming episodes of appreciation and gratitude;

It is a sense of contentment with nature and other people;

It is frequent bouts of smiling through the eyes of the heart;

It is an increasing tendency to let things happen rather than feeling I have to make them happen;

And, finally, it is an overwhelming sense of loving others, all others, whether they're black or white or brown; whether they're Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist; whether they're Republican or Democrat; whether they're straight or gay, and an uncontrollable urge to accept them just as they are because that's how God accepts me, and they're all His children too.

This inner peace which I have been blessed to achieve leads me to address these words of Paul to the Phillipians that we heard in our Second Reading today as the words I want to personally speak to you:

Brothers and Sisters: I pray always with joy in my every prayer for all of you, because of your partnership for the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus. God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer: that your love may increase ever more and more in knowledge and every kind of perception, to discern what is of value, so that you may be pure and blameless for

the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Remember, it all begins with repentance. That's why throughout Advent I am making myself available for sacramental confession and absolution, both before and after the 5:00 P.M. Mass on Saturdays in Church; during the Intercessory Prayer and Adoration before the Blessed Sacrament in Church on Mondays at 7:00 P.M.; on Tuesdays at 6:30 P.M. at the Parish Center (although this Tuesday, due to the Holy Day, I will be available before and after the 7:00 P.M. Mass in Church); and on Thursdays after the Prayer and Anointing of the Sick in Church, beginning at 7:00 P.M.

I promise you that with repentance you too will start to exhibit signs and symptoms of inner peace and your heart will be prepared for the coming of Christ.