



December 12, 2010

The Third Sunday of Advent

Gaudete "Rejoice" Sunday

"Are you the one who is to come or should we look for another?!" Matthew 11:3

Dear Friends;

I was at a fiftieth wedding anniversary party this past summer. I sat next to a couple married nearly sixty years. They told me the secret to their long marriage. The wife said sometimes when they get into arguments she gets very stubborn and will not let go of her point. Then she said her husband says to her, "Do you want to be right or do you want to be happy?" Then she realizes that it is not that important and they reconcile. Love has to conquer our need to be certain.

John the Baptist is remembered for his uncompromising style of preaching. He was working not just for individual personal reform but was calling for systemic reform of society—religious and political. His location out in the wilderness suggests an abandonment of current society. His strongest attacks are directed against the political and religious elites—King Herod and the aristocratic priesthood controlling the temple in Jerusalem.

For John, when the Kingdom comes, the messiah will be an axe wielding, fire-breathing judge. So when Jesus comes along he is a bit confused. Jesus does not meet his expectations. So John asks are you the one? Jesus responds with a different image of messiah—a messiah of mercy, love, and compassion for the weak.

While John may be important to prepare a way; John's approach is not enough. It is not enough to be right, or to turn away from doing evil. One must become something else. That something else is to become the love of God in the flesh. And the one who does this is born into the Kingdom and is greater than John. The way of Jesus is not law and judgment but invitation and the gentle persuasion of love.

"You catch more flies with a teaspoon of honey than a barrel full of vinegar," is a saying attributed to St. Francis de Sales. Francis was born in a noble family. He earned a law degree in his early twenties, but his true desire was to work with the poor and preach the gospel. He gently struggled with his family to allow him to become a priest which he eventually did become.

This was the time of the Protestant Reformation and the people of his diocese of Geneva (a Protestant stronghold) were at war with each other. Francis had an amiable spirit and traveled on foot throughout his diocese. Through his gentleness and good humor he was able to help bring peace to his region. He was eventually made bishop of Geneva and continued to travel on foot, preaching and teaching. He loved to teach children and they followed him wherever he went.

Francis also believed that every ordinary person could become holy. Holiness is not for just an elite few, or professional religious workers. He wrote *"Introduction to the Devout Life"* to help people grow in holiness. It is still in print today.

Francis' winning ways were noted during his own time. A curia official (someone from the pope's bureaucracy) said if you want to win a debate with the Protestants send a certain cardinal. But if you want to win them over send Bishop de Sales.

We are living in difficult times—economically, culturally, in the family and the Church. People are fearful and longing for the fullness of the kingdom. But the choice is what direction will we take—the way of John? Do we need to be right? Do we want to breathe fire and wield an axe to prove our point? There are many in our society and even in Church hierarchy who choose the way of John. They want to tell everyone how it is and how right they are.

Or do we find no offense in the gentle way of Jesus? It is like the loving way of a couple who have figured how to live with each other over many years. It is the way of St Francis de Sales whose gentle ways did more to bring healing than a mountain of denominational vitriol. The choice is ours.

Come, Lord Jesus, come!

Ft Ron