



There is a contemporary Christian music radio station in Fort Wayne that I would listen to sometimes, and they would drive me crazy right after Thanksgiving, because the day after Thanksgiving, I would turn on the station and what would I hear.....“Feliz Navidad”. The day after Thanksgiving they would go rushing right into Christmas.

But our celebration of Christmas is too great of an event just to switch it on right after Thanksgiving. In order to celebrate Christmas properly, we need to prepare properly, and that is why the Church give us this season of Advent. So, today we hear St. John the Baptist’s call to the people of his time and to us: “Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight His paths. Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill made shall be made low.” In other words, make it easy for God to come to you. Tear down the roadblocks that have been put in God’s way.

The first thing that John the Baptist was proclaiming in order to prepare the way of the Lord was repentance. He went through the region, the Gospel says, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Now, a word on that baptism of John. The baptism that John proclaimed and carried out was not the same baptism that we have today. These are two different kinds of baptisms. John’s baptism was only symbolic. It was symbolic of a person’s desire to turn away from sin, but it didn’t do anything. It didn’t change the person from the inside.

Remember what John says in another place, “I have baptized you with water, but He [Jesus] will baptize you with fire and the Holy Spirit.” This is the baptism that we receive through the church, Jesus’ baptism, a baptism which still uses water, but is filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, which washes away our sins, frees us from the chains of original sin, and makes us children of God. But baptism doesn’t take away our free will, as we know, and we are still capable of sin. So the grace of our baptism must be renewed and sometimes even restored if we have sinned gravely.

This is done by the Lord in the sacrament of confession. Jesus renews and restores the grace of our baptism when we, with sorrow, confess our sins and receive this mercy through the priest. So, as preparation for the great celebration of Christmas, we hear John the Baptist’s call to repentance of our sins. Everyone should make a good Advent confession and I will be offering extra confession times in the up-coming weeks in order for you to do that.

This past week I began to hear the confessions of our grade school kids for Advent. I got through the 7th and 8th grade this week. This is one of the great benefits of Catholic schools that during school time we can offer them this sacrament. But a danger that can creep into people's minds is, "Oh that's great that the kids can go to confession, but that's not really for me as a grown-up."

This attitude is dangerous because it's an attitude of saying that "I don't really need God's mercy. I haven't done anything horribly wrong." Maybe that's true, but nonetheless, we all sin and we are all in need of receiving God's mercy...and the sins, they pile up. They do, even the little ones. The effects of our sins, even all the little ones together clog our souls and keep us from loving God and others freely and deeply.

As one Catholic writer described it, it's like with our cars when we throw one little piece of trash into our back seat and then another and then another. Pretty soon all those little pieces of trash have made our cars a mess and in need of a clean-out. Confession is the divine clean-out of our souls. The power of this sacrament washes us clean, strengthens us to avoid sin, and fills us with new joy in the knowledge that we are a forgiven child of God. They say that after we have gone to confession, our souls are as pure and clean as on the day that we were baptized.

My friends, the time for us to sing "Feliz Navidad" is coming soon, but let's prepare well for it, especially by allowing the Lord to cleanse our hearts and souls of sin through the great sacrament of confession.

**Fr. Mark Gurtner at St. Anthony de Padua, South Bend
2nd Sunday of Advent, 2009**