

Advent 3 12.15.24

Around this time each year, there's a reality show which airs called the **Great Christmas Light Fight**. Several families compete (they don't literally fight) to win a \$50,000 prize for the best Christmas light display on their homes. To me, there are few if any other things that scream "American" than this show. It's over-the-top, it's about trying to outperform a competitor, and the notion of Christmas is completely ignored or secularized. The displays are elaborate. And the whole process of putting them together is beyond complicated.

Sometimes we make our practice of religion a complicated thing. Just think back to the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. That Solemnity is celebrated on December 8th each year. Unless December 8th is a Sunday. During the Season of Advent, Church law doesn't permit celebrating saint's days on Sundays. So, the Church moved that Solemnity to Monday, December 9th. For the past several decades, when a Solemnity is moved like that, then the obligation to attend Mass is removed. But not this year. The bishops changed that rule just a few weeks ago. So, this year, December 9th was a holy day of obligation. We were required to attend Mass that day.

Confused? Then join the club. Most priests were surprised when that change was announced. And even the liturgical books in your pews were printed with the old rubric regarding Mass attendance in such circumstances.

In today's gospel, John the Baptist is preaching the Good News to his followers. They were so moved by his words and so hopeful at the announcement that a Messiah was in their midst that they asked what they should do in order to prepare for him.

John the Baptist kept it simple. He gave three instructions that were recorded in today's gospel. First, he said that if you have two coats then give one away to someone who is cold and in need. While that instruction makes sense to us, it was somewhat revolutionary in his day. In the culture and society of John the Baptist and Jesus, you were only required to take care of your family members. No one would be in the habit of giving away an extra coat to a stranger. Normally, a person would hold on to that extra coat in case their first coat wore out or a family member needed it. John reminds us that what we have, we are to share with others...not just with members of our immediate family. We share what we have with others because we are a family in Christ Jesus.

In light of John's teaching, we should ask ourselves the following questions: am I aware of the needs of those around me? Do I respond to those needs and give others what I can, even when it means sacrificing a part of what I have or who I am?

Second, John tells tax collectors to be honest. They are not to cheat others or extort money from them for their own personal gain.

That simple axiom should lead us to ask: do I take advantage of others? Am I unscrupulous in my business practices? Do I steal answers at school from others for my own gain?

Finally, to the soldiers in his audience, John tells them not to bully others. Instead, they are to fairly and justly treat all those under their protection.

This teaching prompts us to ask, do I bully others? Or do I strive to treat others as I wish to be treated?

This is really simple stuff. It's not complicated. But doing these things and more, helps us walk forward toward the Kingdom of God.

When I was a child, I loved decorating our home for Christmas. I enjoyed putting up the lights on the outside of our house. I also never had to be asked to put the lights, garland, and ornaments on the Christmas tree. I couldn't wait to put up the Christmas creche and arrange the figures around the manger.

As much of a help as that might have been to my mom and dad, I'm guessing they were even more pleased when I treated my siblings with respect. When I helped set the table for dinner or washed the dishes without grumbling. When I followed through with doing my homework without being asked. Christmas decorations are nice. But in and of themselves, they don't mean much. They are figuratively just window dressing. What is most important during the Advent and Christmas seasons, and always, is how we live out our faith. It's not complicated. It's actually very simple.

I started serving at Mass as an altar boy from an early age. Aside from assisting on Sunday mornings, altar servers in those days also took turns serving the 6:30 am daily Mass. The rule in our house was that if you wanted to be an altar server, you were responsible for getting yourself up. Heading to church for Mass on your own. Coming home for breakfast. And then walking back to the parish to start your school day. I believe my older brother and I were about 10 years old when we began that ministry.

I noticed after being an altar server for several years that I was the only server who was assigned to assist at the 6:30 am Mass the day after Thanksgiving and the day after Christmas. Usually there were two servers at every Mass, but not on those days. It was just me. When I was in 8th grade I asked our priest why I always got assigned to those Masses. He responded, "because you're the only one who will show up."

The road to the Kingdom of God isn't a complicated or circuitous path. It's pretty simple. Share what we have with those in need. Don't cheat others. Don't bully them. Treat others as we wish to be treated. And in many cases, just show up.

If you want to know God's joy, his "gaudete" in this life and in the life to come, then do these things. And just show up.
Amen? Amen!