3rd Sunday of Advent

Let’s take a look at how the role of John the Baptist fits into the big picture, and look at some of the advice he gave to those who came to him. When we put that together with the joy flowing out of our 1st two readings, and our celebrating Gaudete Sunday, I think it will shed light on why and how the joy of the Gospel, and reaching out to the poor figure so significantly in the ministry and leadership of Pope Francis. I would like to begin with two scenarios. They are a bit out there, but stay with me.

Scenario 1. David didn’t apply himself during his high school years, and his grades show it. It is his senior year, and he realizes that with his transcript, getting into college is pretty unlikely. An uncle and a friend or two convince him that going into the military could be just what he needs to get focused and back on track. So for a first step, he sits down with a recruiter to sort things out. He signs up, and heads off to boot camp. After that, he is ready to settle in to his first deployment, learn the ropes, and have a clear mission.

Scenario 2. Winter break will be coming up before long, and Donna and her family would love to go to Disney Land. First, she has to sit down with a travel agent and see if they can afford the trip. Once the details are worked out, with their admission tickets, they walk in to the world of Disney, so different from the cynical, anxious, troubled world they have escaped, even if only briefly.

You are probably wondering, “where is he going with this?”

John the Baptist was step one in the first century. The first step, to set the stage for the Incarnation, for Jesus coming into the world, Jesus leading people into experiencing the kingdom, living the kingdom, sharing life in the kingdom. John actually recruited many who would become disciples of Jesus. He let them know the cost of getting started, repentance, and living justly, and his baptism served for many as an entrance ticket into the world of the Good News. His part was straightforward, and as we see in our Gospel today, so was his advice. When folks asked “What should we do?” he responded: Repent. Turn away from self-centered choices that hurt others. Do good, not evil. Don’t selfishly horde – if you have more than you need, and someone else doesn’t have a coat, or food for the table – share what you have. Don’t cheat people to get rich. Respect right and wrong, the dignity of others, being truthful. No extortion, false accusation, stirring up trouble – be content.

So recruiter, travel agent: check it out. Here is what you have to do – let’s get you there.

But that isn’t the end of the story, it’s the beginning. It’s not life in the service, on mission, it’s just the entrance exam and basic training. It’s not enjoying Disney world with your family, it’s getting through the main gate.

Once there, once recruited, or through the entrance, our Gospels have Jesus pointing to Jesus. There is the real thing. The Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. He is the one who will help you find your mission. He will lead you into the mystery of a new life, a world shaped by love, not fear; by generosity, not selfishness; by truth, not deception; by compassion.
not indifference; by mercy not judgment; by purpose, not aimless drifting; by joy, not drudgery.

Let me repeat that. John’s message was a call, an invitation to get started: recognize sin. Repent. Accept forgiveness – that is the door into mercy, into Gospel joy.

Walk through the door, and then we can let Jesus take us by the hand; through the challenges of changing, through the temptations that can pull us back out of the new life, beyond the folks who would prefer us to stay as we were, living in the familiar, but cynical world without grace.

Jesus does help us find our mission and live it. He does lead us into the mystery of a new life, a world shaped by love, not fear, by generosity and giving ourselves, not selfishness, by truth, not deception, by deep compassion, not indifference, shaped by God’s mercy, not judgment, by purpose and meaning, not drifting about, by Gospel joy, not drudgery.

Now, another reason for the two particular scenarios. It is Gaudete Sunday – an outburst of joy on the journey to Christmas.

All too often I think we can see the life Jesus calls us to, things like living the Beatitudes, or the works of mercy, as a burden. Something heavy, demanding. But they really are about joy.

Ok, the challenge of becoming a disciple, then becoming Christ’s presence in the world does force us to get into shape, like basic training. We do need to consider the cost.

But the whole point is not grueling basic training. The point is discovering that the Beatitudes are truly about being blessed, finding true happiness. The works of mercy aren’t ‘works’ in the sense of dragging ourselves to work, they are actions that connect us to other people, open doors, lead us to discover a new world. They lead to the discovery that in giving we receive. It’s a world where serving and joy go hand in hand. In reaching out through the works of mercy, we discover the real person, the child of God, who is so much like us, and who can be a gift to us. The real person beyond “one of those poor people”, beyond “one of those dangerous refugees”, beyond “one of those problems”. Works of mercy are about connecting, finding life together, not fixing problems.

Every time we discover the real person, the child of God, made in God’s image, and we connect, amazing joy is released. What’s it like? Like when infant breaks into one of those smiles that just warms you up inside. Joy, the only way to describe it.

So each Advent we honor John the Baptist, our recruiter. We remember getting our ticket into the world of God’s grace. For some, this may be the Advent to be recruited, to get our ticket. In either case, together we let Jesus take us further and further into Gospel joy.