

The Second Sunday in Advent always brings us face-to-face with John the Baptist. John has “stage presence.” His lifestyle of living in the desert (the traditional place of spiritual questing); his “camel hair” clothing fastened with a leather belt; diet of locusts and wild honey; his booming voice delivering a traditional “hell fire and brimstone” sermon are all designed to get our attention. And pay attention we must. However, sometimes I think we get so caught up in the “staging” of John the Baptist that his message is either dismissed as something for those people “back there” or a once-a-year Sunday for homilists to give a similar “Give ‘em hell, Father!” sermon. Without diluting either John the Baptist or his message, perhaps there is another way to look at his message and its on-going relevance for us today.

Recently I’ve been reading the book *Rediscovering Catholicism* by Matthew Kelly a lay theologian from Australia. In chapter eleven of his book “Who will be next?” Kelly recounts a story about Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War. “Lincoln had called for a soldier who had a particularly excellent reputation. Lincoln needed the soldier to deliver a message to another battalion that was dangerously positioned on the other side of the enemy. If both battalions could be coordinated to attack the opposition at the same time, their position would become a strategic advantage.

When the young man arrived, without disclosing the nature of the assignment, Lincoln explained that he had a very dangerous mission and asked the soldier if he would be willing to take on such a commission. He said, ‘I am willing to die for our cause.’ Lincoln replied, ‘I have 25,000 men who are willing to die for the cause. What I need is one who is willing to live for it.’

Kelly observes, “at different times in the history of Christianity, men and women had had to die for their faith. Our own times are not in need of people willing to die for the faith. What the modern Church desperately needs is men and women who are willing to live for the faith.” And then he asks: “*What are you willing to live for?*”

(*Rediscovering Catholicism*, pp. 143,144.) To me, this is the same question John the Baptist poses today.

Advent, and particularly this Second Sunday, give us the opportunity to seriously contemplate this fundamental question of faith and life and begin, or deepen, our commitment to do something about it. Both John the Baptist, and later Jesus as he began his public ministry, issue this challenge: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt. 5:17). As Matthew Kelly notes: “Repent is a powerful word.” It means the same (today) as it did to the people John the Baptist and Jesus addressed it to: “Repent means to turn back to God. ... We often turn away from God. Sometimes in small ways, just for a moment, and at other times it is in larger ways. Turning our backs on God is an inner action. It is quite possible for people to turn their backs on God and still go to church every Sunday (like the scribes and Pharisees in the gospel). External actions alone don’t guarantee internal disposition. ...Every journey toward something is a journey away from something. If we need to turn back to God at this moment in our lives, we also need to turn away from whatever has led us away from God. To repent is to live for and in God. It is, as a follow up to last Sunday’s liturgy, to be focused on God.

At the same time repentance as today’s passages from Isaiah and St. Paul remind us is also a turning toward others—love of God necessarily includes love for the person of our neighbor. To repent is not only (or solely) about saving ourselves but to also be motivated to work for justice for others, to strive to bring about the vision of a society and world in which there is no more “harm or ruin” but rather peace and harmony where we think and act in “one voice” glorifying God in all that we do bearing the fruit of the traditional seven gifts of the Holy Spirit spoken about in Isaiah’s prophesy.

Like Abraham Lincoln, God calling to us through John the Baptist, Isaiah and St. Paul: *What are you living for?*