

## 2nd Sunday of Advent cycle A

One of my brother seminarians in Toronto thought it would be a nice diversion for a Saturday afternoon to take in a show, and so plans were made for all fourteen of us to attend “Les Miserables.” I decided that I might as well go if for no other reason than to get out of the place for a while; but the more I thought about the book and that title, the more I wondered, what was I getting myself into? I had never been to a real musical before—I don’t think I even attended any high school musicals back in the day. And this? Was the whole thing, like the title, in French, was it going to be like some foreign opera? Was it interminable, like the book? I envisioned sitting there, bored beyond all measure, pleading with God to speed up the clock. And on top of all that, who wants to spend an afternoon with people who, as the title seemed to indicate, were miserable, and who might be speaking French the whole time they were feeling that way? But, the money was invested in the ticket, and I had no one to pawn it off on, although I would have if I could have, and so I went. Hours later, I left the theater glad that I had gone. It turned out to be a pivotal moment for me that year, sort of my break-out moment, when I realized that God was giving me all sorts of unique opportunities there to experience new things, things I would never otherwise have experienced. It became a day of new friendships: while those other lazy slugs took the trolley back home, John Birkel—many of you know him of course as Father Birkel—and I walked back; and a guy that I had had no time for before became the friend that I could rely on for support more than any other that year. And, yeah, I really enjoyed the show. Sometimes, we ask for and expect very little from life; God wants more for us, though, and will use unexpected moments, and seemingly inconsequential events, to give us that more which he desires for us.

In today’s Gospel passage from Matthew, some of the Pharisees and Sadducees approach John the Baptist as he was baptizing in the Jordan River, and are met with a greeting that’s hard to categorize as anything less than hostile: “you brood of vipers, who told you to flee from the coming wrath?” It’s clear that John doesn’t have any great, warm affectionate feelings for the two groups, but he’s particularly upset about their approaching to him for baptism. But his reaction, while strong, shouldn’t be all too surprising. He has every reason to doubt their sincerity in asking for him to perform this ritual. It was, and John made this clear, a baptism of repentance. So you have the Pharisees, who believed that they didn’t have anything to repent of, who believed that they were not sinful as were all those other people who did not keep every minute detail of the law; and you have the Sadducees, who wouldn’t have seen any purpose in

repentance because they didn't believe in any life beyond this one. If it doesn't gain you anything, then why do it? So their approach was transparent: it was for religious show. And John doesn't send them away, but challenges them to come to true repentance by producing the good fruits—the evidence—that they are actually changing their beliefs, that they're ready to receive what he's offering them there in the river, and that they're not merely going through motions to impress themselves with their own ever-greater religiosity.

“I am baptizing with water, for repentance, but the one who is coming after me will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” John's ritual is of repentance and introduction, introduction to the one greater than he who will come after him. John baptizes with water, the one greater than he with the Holy Spirit—and fire. Water cleanses, it washes clean; fire transforms, it changes that which it burns, reduces it down. The baptism of repentance says “I'm sorry,” and for that reason is good in and of itself; God certainly invites us to repent and to express sorrow for our sins. But Jesus' baptism is about gaining more: it says to God more than “I'm sorry.” It says “I'm ready”—ready to convert, ready to make a change in my life, to have this change of heart. It says “I'm willing”—willing to start making sacrifices, willing to deny myself and take up my cross, however big it may be. It says “I'm following”—it goes beyond promise of what we will do tomorrow, and says “look, the journey is underway.” The baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire is God, seeing us with our sorrow for sins, and then offering us even more than his forgiveness, substantial though that is. Not enough that we not be punished: God wants to lavish gifts on us, give us a share in eternity as he knows it, he wants us to not only come in from the cold, but to come and live in mansion; his mansion, where every need is fulfilled and every longing satisfied.

Isaiah professed about the shoot that shall sprout from the stump of Jesse, referring to Jesus, and says “the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him; and his delight shall be the fear of the Lord.” This is the Spirit sent upon those who sought Jesus' baptism, who sought repentance and then sought still more after that. Isaiah offers an idyllic vision of heaven: he sees it as a place where enemies are not only reconciled, but actually mingle; natural enemies make peace—the wolf and the lamb, the calf and the young lion; the cow and the bear. No harm or ruin at all on this holy mountain. Think of it: what did original sin do, except usher in harm and ruin in the world? Isaiah's vision is of a world healed of sin and of the effects of sin, and he says this shall be, for the earth shall be filled with knowledge of the Lord. Knowledge; we're harkening back to the creation story again, when Satan

tempted Adam and Eve with fruit from the tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. It was in misusing that gift that man declared that he could be his own moral authority, with the same kind of knowledge as God, knowledge that not only knows right from wrong, but decides right and wrong for himself; man tried to take God's place as man's ultimate moral authority. This baptism of Jesus, then, announces that he is the only true authority to whom we look, and he sets things right again—justification—by taking us past repentance into his own divine life. Paul wrote to the Romans “may the God of endurance grant you to think in harmony with one another.” Harmony—working with, instead of against others; this is Isaiah's vision: harmony between the wolf and the lamb, between the leopard and the kid, the child and the adder; a world of no harm, no ruin; a paradise.

John's anger as he baptized in the Jordan was because the Pharisees and the Sadducees asked for much, but were open to so little; they wanted a dry repentance, in which perhaps they expressed sorrow for their sins, but never really believed that they had any sins to begin with; and therefore, repentant though they may be, would feel no compulsion to undergo a conversion of heart and reform their lives. Repentance is important, and it's the beginning of the experience of peace and harmony that God wants us to know, but it can't end there; if it does, we've set our sights too low. God wants us to experience more than mere cleansing: he wants us to be transformed, so that we're able to live with him. So often in life, we start out with meager expectations, and discover so much more. And in our faith, we start out with repentance, but aren't to stop there. We're called to keep going, to order our lives according to God's law so that we find the peace, and hope, and harmony that God desires for us. As John told the Pharisees and Sadducees, every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. But the tree that bears good fruit—that one will experience life on God's holy mountain.

Copyright © 2007