

There are two major themes running through today's Scripture readings; one has to do with morality, with right and wrong, and with what those words might mean in the concrete context of our lives. The other is about singing and joy. It is summed up in the opening line of our reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians: "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say, rejoice."

The gospel today, as last Sunday, focuses on John the Baptist, the preacher who stands at the beginning of all the Gospels calling people to conversion in preparation for the coming of the Messiah.

In today's reading, different people, including a group of tax collectors and a group of soldiers ask John what his preaching implies for them, given their situations and their responsibilities. Before answering their question, John speaks to the whole crowd that has gathered to listen to him. Of them, he asks one thing only, that they share what they have with those in need. This is a fundamental moral principle that comes back repeatedly throughout the Bible. The prophets in particular challenge us in this regard. They speak out repeatedly on behalf of widows, orphans and foreigners living in Israel. People in these situations were far more vulnerable than they are in our society, as vulnerable as such people sometimes continue to be.

Luke, from whose Gospel today's reading is taken, comes back more frequently and more forcefully than the other evangelists to the double theme of the danger of wealth and of the need to care for and not abuse the poor.

In our culture, this time of the year is a crucial one for individuals and institutions who rely on fund raising for their activities. Many people, even when they are non-believers, are inspired to be generous by that highly amorphous but very real holiday spirit which touches most of us at this time of the year.

Generosity and gift are, in fact, at the heart of Christmas. The gift that gives all other gifts a deeper and spiritual meaning is the gift that God gives us of himself in the child Jesus.

Every child is a gift, a gift of life and of promise. No matter how negative our own experience might have been and might even be, most of us tend to smile or to feel a certain tenderness at the sight of infants and of the love of parents and others that surround them. People, on the other hand, who abuse children, provoke our abhorrence. They are robbing their victims not only of their innocence but also of their trust in life and especially in adults.

Having enunciated the general principle about the importance of the sharing of the haves with the have-nots, John addresses the question raised by

the soldiers and tax collectors about what they should do given who they are and the kind of work and situation in which they find themselves. John's advice to the soldiers is simple and straightforward. Do the things that you are mandated to do, but do them honestly. Above all, do not use your power and authority to extract money from anyone by threats or false accusations. His advice to the tax collectors is equally simple. Be honest, he says, do not use your position to take advantage of others. "Collect no more," he says, "than the amount prescribed."

Given the fact that most of us are neither soldiers nor tax collectors, what, we might ask, has all this has to do with us.

Reading the Scriptures is similar in certain ways to looking at works of art. If we simply glance at a painting or a sculpture or if we remain passive in front of it, if we bring nothing of our own to it, it will say very little to us. Art demands an active response. We have to look, yes, and look again, but we also have to think, to put questions to the work and to allow it to question us. A genuine encounter with Scripture or a work of art always ends by having an impact on us, by enabling us to see ourselves and life from a somewhat different perspective.

As we listen to today's gospel, we might ask what John would say to us if he were here, given that we are bankers or financial advisors, custodians or teachers,

clerks in a store, mothers at home with small children, IT experts. The possibilities are endless. The question, however, is always the same. What does this text or texts like it have to say to me in the concreteness of my life and of my responsibilities? What, in other words, can I do to prepare the way of the Lord and of his kingdom, a kingdom of peace and justice, of goodness and generosity, of love, compassion and mercy?

Today's first reading, the responsorial psalm and the second reading all speak of joy and rejoicing. "Sing aloud, O daughter Zion," Zachariah encourages the inhabitants of the city, "Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem." "Shout and sing for joy," Isaiah cries, "for great in your midst is the Holy one of Israel."

The traditional name for this, the third Sunday of Advent is Gaudete Sunday, a name that comes from the Latin translation of the first word of today's reading from the Letter to the Philippians. Gaudete in Domino, rejoice in the Lord. Such rejoicing is at home in our celebration at Christmas of the love of God revealed in the birth of the child Jesus. Our rejoicing, Paul suggests, ought to overflow in gentleness and, I would add, generosity, toward others. That, in turn, will fill our hearts with peace.