

Sunday Homily

3RD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

12 DECEMBER 2021

YEAR C

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK III

"What must we do?"

Illustration

Father Michael finally sat down at his computer. He'd been interrupted several times that day as he tried to write a school report that was already a week late. Just as he was beginning to put his fingers to the keyboard, the doorbell rang. He was tempted to ignore it, but out of duty he stomped towards the front door and yanked it open. It was Patrick. Father Michael knew his caller very well. Patrick was a "gentleman of the road" who liked a drink now and then. The priest would usually pass the time of day with Patrick, who would then happily move on, having gained the price of a cup of tea. Today, however, was different. Angry that he'd been disrupted, Father Michael snapped: "And what do you want?" Patrick began his usual story, building up to the request for a little money. But Father Michael was not in the mood. Before Patrick had the chance to ask, he was sent away and the door was slammed shut behind him.

Father Michael returned to his computer and started to type. But now he was even more frustrated, not because he'd been disturbed, but because he'd been so unkind. All he could think about was Patrick's stooped figure walking down the presbytery path. To make things worse, it was a few weeks before Christmas and the snow was gently falling. He imagined himself as Scrooge in Charles Dickens' book *A Christmas Carol*.

Then the doorbell rang again. Unable to concentrate on writing his report, Father Michael went to see who it was. There stood another gentleman of the road. Immediately, Father Michael pulled one of his coats off its hook and thrust it towards the man. The visitor was slightly bemused by the priest's gesture, particularly because he hadn't even had time to ask for anything. Wearing his new coat, and with the price of a meal in his pocket, the man set off on his way. Father Michael returned to his computer. As he began to type, he smiled knowingly to himself. Had God taught him a lesson? If only he'd been generous when he first had the chance, it would have cost him the price of a cup of tea and not his best overcoat.

Gospel Teaching

At the beginning of today's Gospel, the people put a question to John the Baptist: "What must we do?" It doesn't really make sense unless we remember what John was telling them, and us, earlier in the text. Last Sunday we heard

John announce the coming of the Lord. A path must be prepared for the one who brings salvation. It's almost as if the people who heard John's message wanted to know what it meant in practice: how do we smooth and straighten our lives into a welcoming highway for the Lord? Today we hear John's answer. We can make our hearts ready to receive Christ by sharing what we have with those who have nothing and by treating others with fairness and respect. Jesus will reveal God's love to us. Our faith-response to that loving presence requires that we act according to the ways of justice and always with the greatest kindness and charity.

How we behave towards others is a measure of how deeply we have welcomed Christ into our hearts. But, as well as reflecting on what we do, we are also invited to think about the spirit in which we act. Zephaniah speaks of the joy that proclaims God's presence among us. St Paul invites his hearers always to be happy in the Lord. It's one thing to share what we have begrudgingly or out of duty; it's another thing completely to do so happily and joyfully.

Application

Advent is a time of waiting in joyful hope. We are looking forward to celebrating the fulfilment of God's promise. It's a time of thankfulness for God's generous love, made real for us in Jesus. John the Baptist knew that this love was a free and undeserved gift. He was not even worthy to bend low and undo Christ's sandals. We do not have to be worthy to welcome Jesus, but we are called to be willing to let his presence change our attitudes and behaviour.

The Gospel shows us what this means in practice. Whatever shape they take, genuine Christian generosity and kindness will always be expressed with happiness and joy. We rejoice in God's gifts to us; let's also be joyful in happily sharing them with others.