

TWO SIDES OF ONE COIN

John the Baptist showed himself to be a different type of guy. He lived in the desert. He wore very simple clothing and ate simple food. There is no record of him being married. Presumably, he spent much time in prayer and fasting. His calling, his vocation was to be a prophet and he lived it to the full.

The gospel today picks up not too far from where it left off last week. Again we find John the Baptist in the wilderness. People were coming to him to be baptized. While our sacrament of baptism didn't exist yet, this type of baptism was meant to be a significant religious experience. People confessed their sins and shared in baptism. This was an act of repentance. Repentance means turning around. To repent is to turn from evil to good, from vice to virtue, from lies to truth.

John's mission was a universal call to repentance. He called everyone to repentance. And if we think we don't need to repent of something, well that's Exhibit A that we do in fact need to repent, maybe not of a grave sin but in one way or another, we all need to repent.

But there's more to repentance than saying I'm sorry and going through a religious ritual. *Repentance calls people to change the way they live.* Those who came out to John seemed to realize this, we find three groups of people asking the same question: *What should we do?* As with Jesus, what John doesn't say is significant. John didn't tell the people, they had to live in the desert, dress like he did, or forego marriage. He didn't expect them to all be like him. But as it is with Jesus, what John does say is also significant. His advice isn't in generalized terms such as do good and avoid evil. Rather his words are direct and concrete.

What should we do? Three times John the Baptist is asked this first by the crowds, then by tax-collectors and then by soldiers. John tells the crowd to live life generously, to share what they have with those in need. He calls them to think about more than just themselves. He calls them out of the prison of their own egos. The call to be generous is ultimately a call to be charitable, a call to love our neighbor.

John doesn't tell the hated tax collectors to not be tax collectors but he calls them to act justly, to be just tax collectors who don't cheat, steal or collect bribes. Biblically, justice means being faithful in our relationships. Philosophically it means giving people what they are due. But either way you slice it, they are to act fairly, to do the right thing.

And it doesn't stop there. John doesn't even tell the soldier to not be soldiers but rather to be good soldiers, honest soldiers. They're to avoid extortion and false accusations. In other words, they are to live lives that are honest. They're to be honest in what they do and honest respecting the dignity of others ideally using their strength to protect others rather than to cruelly dominate them.

Generosity, justice and honesty are three ways we're to repent in our lives; three ways we're to prepare for the coming of Christ. Generosity, justice and honesty are virtues that can be practiced more in the marketplace than in the desert. We see in families, in the workplace, in the world and even in the Church, what happens, sometimes with tragic consequences, when people fail to live lives of generosity, justice and honesty.

What we find in John the Baptist is a universal call to repentance and yet that call to repentance is at the same time a call to share in the mercy of a loving God. It's a call to holiness. Just as there is a universal call to repentance, so too, there's a universal call to holiness. They are two sides of one coin.

We're all called to holiness, not merely to stay out of trouble, but to be holy. God calls us to intimacy with him but we live this out in different ways whether it be as single person, in marriage, consecrated life or Holy Orders. Holiness can be found in every honest walk of life. We must find God in the ordinary stuff of life or we may not ever find him at all. Each day we receive opportunities to grow in holiness and St. Therese reminds us that this can happen in every *little way*.

John didn't expect everyone to live like him but he did expect them to follow in the way of God. He had his vocation and each of us has our own vocation, our own calling from God. We live our faith not just at Sunday Mass and not just by doing things at the parish, although I ask a lot of people to do that. We're called as missionary disciples to live our faith everyday and in every way. We need people sharing Christ's values in boardrooms, break rooms and classrooms; in operating

rooms, waiting rooms and court rooms; in the marketplace and wherever people may be.

Holiness involves not becoming less but more of who we really are called to be. We prepare the way of the Lord when with lives of intentional faith, hope, and charity; when we act with generosity, justice and honesty in every area of our lives. God calls all of us to holiness, a holiness both intimate and challenging. Don't run away from that intimacy. Don't run away from that challenge.

When we accept this call to holiness, the call to be who we're meant to be, we too prepare the way of the Lord through lives of generosity, justice and honesty. The universal call to repentance and the universal call to holiness, form two sides of one coin, one call. Nourished by the Eucharist we now celebrate, may we always with open hearts and open hands, answer that call.