

**Homily for December 6, 1998
Second Sunday of Advent
By Father Charles Bowes**

**Isaiah 11: 1-10
Romans 15: 4-9
Matthew 3: 1-12**

We are both beauty and beast and the Lord is with us.

On public television there a program called "Nature" during which I inevitably fall asleep but not until I have a chance to see just a piece of it. Lions were sunning themselves in the swaying grasses of the savanna, the cubs cavorting and the mother licking her coat. They looked like nothing more than overgrown housepets. It was a scene to warm the heart.

Then suddenly the sound track changed: the cats had left their play to stalk a herd of antelope. One member of the herd was limping. The lions charged. The herd of antelope broke into full gallop and scattered over the plain. The injured animal, terror in its eyes, could not take off. A lion caught the antelope by its bum leg, and the others tore into the downed creature. They had turned from cuddly oversized kittens to ferocious beasts.

I thought to myself, how brutal the world! The poet Tennyson was right: "Nature red in tooth and claw," red with blood, red with terror, red with violence. I was glad to be a human being, not an antelope.

Then I switched channels and saw a piece of the evening news. A top story was a murder. There was a close-up of a red pool on the gray sidewalk. The scene of the devouring lions flashed again in my mind. We humans are more like them than we often dare to admit. We delude ourselves about who we are as creatures of earth if we fail to acknowledge the whole long history of our brutality and violence that continues to this very moment.

John the Baptist was not given to such delusions about the human. He must have been a royal pain: he had something to say about everything and something to say to everybody, and it was never an agreeable word. He stretched the envelope, as they say, at every opportunity. Striding up the center aisle of our church this Advent Sunday, John would perturb us no end with his presence and his message. "You brood of vipers," he says to us. This is not the kind of preaching that goes over well in a culture that encourages us to think positively of ourselves and to celebrate our gifts and strengths. Of course it is important to claim the graces granted us, but to focus only on the goodness of human beings is to negate the necessity of the action John calls for: repentance, preparing a way for God, bearing good fruit, being purified by holy fire. John the Baptist shakes us to the root of our being, forcing us to come

to terms with the need for radical transformation. Yes, we can be as playful, as affectionate and peaceful as that pride of lions enjoying the sun in the long grass. But we can also be just as destructive. If not with a gun we fire ourselves, then with an army. If not with an army, then with an economic system that wreaks havoc on people at the bottom of the social ladder. If not with physical violence, then with a word. If not with a word, then with our silence. It is because of our destructive capacity that John proclaims the message he does: we will not be ready for Christ if we do not acknowledge how we are a mixture of beast and beauty, of violence and peace, of hatred and love. And of course my immediate reaction and maybe yours too is that while good old John's message applies to others first, it does not really apply to me, to us. After all, we are the good, religious people, for we already have turned to God. But John warns against such presumption. He tells the pious not to presume with their religious identity, that it will not protect them from judgement nor from their being displaced by more faithful people whom God is able to raise up from stones: "Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'we have Abraham as our father,' For I tell you, God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones. Even now the ax lies at the root of the trees. Therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire," says Matthew 3.

John is as fierce in his preaching as a charging lion, but his prey is different. His prey is human presumption. His prey is human illusion. His prey is human arrogance. His prey is everything that would block us from being ready to receive Christ, and John is wise enough to see that it is not disbelief but wrong belief that will close us to the Savior. Believing we are good, ignoring the lions that rage in our heart, we will

become dogmatic and rigid, dressing up our violence in the attire of religious speech and moral judgements against those who are different from ourselves.

And how did John come to this insight? Perhaps it was because he had come to terms with the wildness in himself - that he was such a wild and crazy guy. The description of his clothing and diet suggest someone who knew that to be human is to be a creature of earth. He saw beneath the costumes of civilization, the raw and raving beast that lives in each of us and how that beast prowls through our heads and mind: as fear, as prejudice, as hunger for vengeance, as a desire to control and compel others.

When we come to terms to these realities as honestly as did John the Baptist, then we, like him are ready to receive the One whose sandals we are not worthy to carry. And we will move closer to realizing the prophet's vision - Isaiah 11, - a vision for which this blood red world hungers: "the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fattling together, and a little child shall lead them."

Oh, just to open our hearts to acknowledge that we are in need enables us to receive this holy food and savor this fellowship which is the glorified flesh and blood of Christ, our salvation and our hope and our forgiveness.

In the mid 1950's, Flannery O'Connor wrote to a friend who was considering whether to become a Catholic. "The operation of the Church," O'Connor wrote, "is entirely set up for the sinner, which creates much misunderstanding among the smug."

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