

Homily for December 15, 2002  
3rd Sunday in Advent Cycle B

By Father Charles Bowes

Isaiah 61:1-2a, 10-11  
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24  
John 1:6-8, 19-28

*We need eccentric folks like John the Baptist, like Jesus, so we can locate ourselves in the scheme of things.*

I like the word “eccentric” – it means out of the circle or odd, weird, strange, peculiar, not in the mainstream. Both John the Baptist and Jesus fit that label quite well. In fact, both were dismissed as eccentric.

Look at John – look at that diet, those clothes. And shouting in a wilderness! But the word “eccentric” literally means “off center.” And the center position today is that “having, getting, and spending are the keys to the good life.” So who is really off center? Us, or John the Baptist?

I think it is fortunate that we have to go face-to-face with John each Advent. It is a time when we are bombarded by media to celebrate Christmas with more spending, getting, and having. This man of the wilderness is, first of all, a courageous man who faced up to the evils of his day willing to suffer for truth's sake; remember, he is finally axed to death and his head served up on a plate because he confronted a king with his sin of lust. But in John's eyes, Jesus was the eccentric one. John couldn't even recognize Jesus at first, nor did he warm up to the idea of Jesus as Messiah later on when he was in prison for

haranguing Herod about his bogus marriage. For John, the law was everything. Like the Scribes and the Pharisees, it was his understanding that people had to pay the price for their sins. So, when he heard that Jesus was letting everybody off the hook by healing them and even raising them from the dead, he sent word to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?”

It wasn't John's fault. He learned the way of God from very righteous parents. It takes a real change of attitude to recognize Jesus among us. His presence is completely antithetical to any idea that God's favor and forgiveness can be gained through something that we can do. God simply forgives, free and clear.

And that's what we're going to be celebrating Monday evening at 7:30 – an Advent communal reconciliation service. What draws us to this sacrament is not so much a need to be purified or to have guilt assuaged or to pay the price for sin – no, that's not the reason. People today are more drawn to celebrate this sacrament when we experience the call to worship a merciful, forgiving God. That's the God Jesus reveals, and when we gather as a body to celebrate God's forgiveness, we do so precisely by being in contact with our brokenness and weakness, our sinfulness and

our unloving choices. We need not be ashamed because God is not ashamed of being human. In fact, the human way of giving to God is to receive, since God made us so that God might have someone to whom he could give, someone to whom he could give Himself. That's cause for great rejoicing – Advent is half over, and we can rejoice in the forgiveness we celebrate here and at every Eucharist – and especially in the sacrament of reconciliation.

We need eccentric folks like John the Baptist, like Jesus, so we can locate ourselves in the scheme of things.