

Homily Advent IIIC: 16 Dec 2012: HT-W/XII-PC

A paradox can be defined as a pair of assertions which seem incompatible, two claims that appear to exclude each other. The Christian religion is full of paradoxes. God is one and three, one God in three persons. Jesus is God and man, fully divine and fully human. The Church is holy and made up of sinners. These paradoxes come from the mysterious workings of God, who is a reality far greater than the human mind can comprehend, who works in a marvelous manner that ever eludes our grasp. It shouldn't surprise us that God is mysterious; after all, other human beings can be rather mysterious themselves! Nonetheless, a lot of folks who pride themselves on their intellectual prowess think they should be able to understand God perfectly; when they encounter the paradoxical doctrines of the Catholic faith, they dismiss it out of hand as mere superstition. Some are just too proud to accept what they cannot comprehend.

There is a paradoxical flavor to the readings for this 3rd Sunday of Advent, aka Gaudete Sunday: the first 2 readings speak of rejoicing. It's even the object of a command in both of them: Zephaniah tells Jerusalem--Be glad and exult w/ all your heart! St. Paul orders his readers, Rejoice! Sort of like saying, Rejoice, or else! Usually we think of joy as something that happens spontaneously when fortune smiles on us, rather than a state of being that can be summoned up voluntarily. The paradox deepens w/ the gospel, which focuses on John the Baptist. His mission of calling folks to repentance doesn't really put one in a joyful mood. We tend to associate penance w/ tears and laments and all sorts of bad feelings, not w/ joy. People moan and groan as they give up all those things they really like to do because they're afraid the big bad divinity is going to sit on them if they get caught. In essence, the readings are telling us to do penance and to rejoice. Quite a paradox!

Joy and sorrow go together in the endeavor of Christian penance. The sorrow that accompanies penance arises from the separating of oneself from sinfulness; however bad sin may be, it has its allure--that's why people fall into it! That's pretty obvious w/ sins against the sixth commandment. It's also true of other sins--anger, greed, etc. All these vices appeal to some basic human appetite, but when this desire is indulged to a sinful degree, it distorts the human character and makes us miserable. Unchastity leads to sinful habits and broken relationships; anger creates tensions, disrupts friendships, and may even lead to violence; greed deprives others of their fair share and enslaves the greedy to their possessions. Detaching oneself from these sins--ending the affair, controlling one's temper, renouncing one's wealth--is hard to do; it may even require divine assistance. But this penance is salutary. It helps us become the holy people God wants us to be. That is why Christian penance is always leavened w/ spiritual joy, for we know this penance, this sorrow, helps bring enduring peace and joy to our hearts. In fact, not only does it make us better people, it also deepens our communion w/ Christ; Christian penance is a sharing in our Savior's passion, his suffering for the redemption of the world. So it's appropriate that everyone get to the sacrament of Penance during Advent. By doing penance in

this sacramental forum, we get a guaranteed divine assist in the work of our redemption. And that will enable us to celebrate the real meaning of Christmas, w/ our hearts filled w/ the joy that our God truly dwells among us the people he has chosen as his own!