

08 March 2020, The 2nd Sunday of Lent: John 3:1-17

There are three kinds of Christians. One kind is the fearful Christian. Fearful Christians concentrate on rules; when one follows the rules, there is a temporary sense of accomplishment and security. Fearful Christians look down on those who do not follow the rules very well or at all. They are the quickest to criticize others. You may think fear-based Christians are only traditionalists or conservative. Many progressives are also fear-based, just concentrating on different rules.

A second kind is the Good-Enough Christian. In this case, being a follower of Jesus has some priority but there are other competing values, thought patterns, morality and conduct which serve just as well, depending on circumstances and needs or desires of the individual. Actions, let alone ideals of, sacrifice, transformation and growth are greeted with skepticism, indifference, even hostility. When the going gets tough, Good-Enough Christians have something else to do.

The third kind is different from Fear-based and Good-Enough Christians: these are Joy-Filled Christians. Joy-Filled Christians live in and for Christ out of grateful love—Christ's love received and our responding love for God offered to others. Joy-Filled Christians shape their thoughts, words and deeds to glorify Christ; there is an identifiable pattern to their lives, governed by a Reality deeper than rules. Grateful, they want their lives always more transformed by Christ. What a difference between being fearful, listless and joyful! Fear and indolence are about *us*, our pre-occupations, our comfort. Joy is response to what is good and beautiful. Joy grows as we receive; the more we receive from Joy's source, the more Joy we know and share.

We are confronted with the truth that right belief about God leads to the right ideal and practice of being a human being. The necessity of right belief is not a popular notion, yet it is nonetheless true: right belief results in joy, gratitude and celebration. We see this clearly the last two verses of today's Gospel: *For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.* God's only begotten took on humanity that humanity will receive eternal life, that the world will be saved through Him. If we can even begin to grasp this truth about God's deepest desire what place will fear, or laziness have? Salvation is a gift freely offered to all through Jesus Christ. As we accept the free gift we live in the joy of God's amazing goodness to us and everyone. *Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Word of God, of his boundless love, became what we are that He might make us what He Himself is*, wrote Bishop Irenaeus in the 2nd Century. Isn't this awesome?!

How is one a joy-filled Christian? First, *look* on Jesus. I do not say study Him, but 'look on Him' by which is meant fix your attention on Jesus in amazement, wonder and love. One way of doing this is to spend 10 minutes each day looking intently and prayerfully at a cross, crucifix, icon, or other Christian symbol of Jesus while slowly and prayerfully repeating these or similar words, "For us and for our salvation." A cross or icon is not required, but helpful; think of Jesus; quietly repeat "for us and our salvation." Through the practice of such focused prayer we become joy-filled.

A second way flows from the first: Look on humanity with the eyes of Jesus; praying for this gift is essential. St. Augustine wrote: *Let humankind raise its hopes and recognize its own nature. Let it observe how high a place it has in the works of God. Do not despise yourselves, you men: the Son of God assumed humanity. Do not despise yourselves, you women: God's Son was born of a woman.* To accept the grace of God through the cross that brings eternal life we must recognize our infinite value. Again, it is for us and for our salvation that God the Son assumed our flesh, suffered beyond all suffering and rose from the dead so that we may rise with Him out of death into eternal life. Why? Because all human beings everywhere are the apple of God's eye. What room is there for fear, despair or sloth if we believe in such a generous, merciful, loving God? What room will there be for judgment, division or hatred if we ask God to help us see everyone as God sees them, to with everyone God's mercy, forbearance and kindness?

God's love lived, brings deep joy. May you joyfully receive and joyfully share God's love. Amen.