

I was watching a television show about a week ago. It was a lawyer show, and in the major thread of plot line, the heroine was defending a person who had (perhaps) lost her job because of her religious beliefs. In one scene, the prosecuting attorney had the defendant on the stand and was reading to her from the Book of Leviticus, from the section called the “Purity Codes.” There are some beautifully high standards for the behavior of the religious community set by these Codes. There are directions about respecting your elders, not cheating at trade, leaving gleanings in the field at harvest time for the poor to find sustenance. Here’s an example: “You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but *you shall love your neighbor as yourself*. I am the Lord. (Lev. 19:17) Love your neighbor as yourself....sound familiar?

The prosecuting attorney didn’t use any of what might be called these ‘positive’ passages – the ones directed toward loving, sharing, and respecting others. The script called for her to use one of the verses about punishment, and there are some of those, to be sure, though fewer by far in number. Here’s an example: “All who curse father or mother shall be put to death...” (Lev. 20:9a) Then there’s this rule: “A man or a woman who is a medium or a wizard shall be put to death; they shall be stoned to death, their blood is upon them.” (Lev. 20:27) This was one of the passages that ‘justified’ the killing of mostly mentally ill or ‘odd’ women and men during the witch trials on the Continent and later in the Colonies. Of course, much of that activity was about eliminating from the community anyone who was different, and, of course, seizing their property. Perhaps the courts of those days called it ‘justifiable homicide.’

Anyway, the prosecuting attorney on the TV show read a couple of these sorts of passages and then looked at the defendant incredulously and said, “Do you *believe* this?” To which the defendant gave a response along the lines of what might be expected from a fundamentalist. There was no time to explain, no time for contextual interpretation, just a straight, unclarified, up or down ‘vote’ on the literal veracity and applicability of each and every single word.

A corollary plot line in the same episode featured the daughter of the star of the show expressing an interest in Christianity. When she was commenting about this to her mother, the mother responded, “I thought you’d gotten beyond that.” Later in the same show, the young teenage girl gave her mother a real fright by turning up missing after school one day. When she was finally discovered, she was found in a church with someone (a friend? a minister?) who was ‘secretly’ baptizing her without any witnesses or sponsors, obviously without her parents’ knowledge or approval. One person commented to me earlier in the week that it seemed as if the girl had managed to find the peace of Christ in spite of her family’s resistance. Another felt as if it was a recurrence of the same theme – the attempt to present Christianity as odd, even absurd or cultish.

In this morning’s Gospel we read about a public ministry of baptism. We heard a story about John the Baptist baptizing people, calling them to repent of their sins. He declares that his ministry, his calling, is to prepare the way of the Lord. In response to the question: “What do you say about yourself?” John the Baptist replies: “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord’.” People get ready – the Messiah is coming. Imagine the reception of John the Baptist today: some guy dressed in camel’s hair, eating locusts and wild honey and calling people to be sorry for all their sins, while dipping them backwards in the Niagara River. Talk about odd....

But I am here on this third Sunday of Advent declaring to you that *we are the voices crying out in the wilderness today*. The wilderness is the dominant culture – a culture typified by an attitude of ‘what’s in it for me’ or ‘I’ve got mine, Jack, too bad for you.’ It is a culture in which

the fanatical voices have taken center stage, managing to dismiss or trivialize the wonder and the majesty of our great faith. Frankly, it seems to me that we are living in an era when many of the great religions are under siege, having been taken over by their own ultra-radical fringe. The response of the media is to treat people of faith in general as if they have no minds with which to think reasonably. Against this onslaught on our faith, mainstream Christianity is largely silent.

Yet the Gospel calls us to cry out, to make the way straight for the coming of Christ. But what are we to cry out? What is the message of our great faith? What do we have to say to the world around us? Paraphrasing the words of the prophet Isaiah from our first lesson:

“The Lord has sent me to bring *good news* (that’s what the word ‘gospel’ means – good news): to comfort those whose hearts are broken.” We start ‘crying out’ simply by being bearers of the good news. And I myself have some good news for us: we do NOT have to dress in camel’s hair and eat locusts and wild honey like John the Baptist in order to prepare the way for Jesus in our various environments. We also (probably) don’t have to worry about being beheaded for our trouble, like Herod did to ole’ JTB.

No funky clothes, no yucky food, no sudden chopping off of our heads. So far, sounds not as bad as it could be.

Here are just a few concrete suggestions for where to begin. When someone in our environment suffers a loss or is facing a crisis, let’s make a point of telling them that we will keep them in our prayers. Then let’s do it. Let’s show that we care, and more importantly, show that the reason that we care is because of our faith. We begin by telling the person we will pray; then we actually pray for that person; and finally we go back to the person to see how they are doing. We make a full circle of caring.

Another way we can be a voice crying out in the wilderness is by doing active service that helps others because we believe that that’s what Jesus Christ wants us to do. Be loving toward people, not judgmental and harsh. Bring the Spirit of Christ to others through a smile, a kindness, a phone call, a note sent in Christ’s name. Let’s let people know how thankful we are for what we have – and that we know it’s all a gift from God. Let’s thank God for our children, our families, our homes, the food on our tables – and let our friends and family know how thankful we are that God has given them to us to love.

It turns out the woman in the television show was fired because pretty unloving to her co-workers. She was a chronic trouble-maker. She tried to impose her ideas on others and got into arguments with them at work. She wasn’t fired because of her beliefs – she was fired because she was a mean-spirited know-it-all. That’s not what John the Baptist meant by preparing the way of the Lord. Far from it. When people who call themselves Christian are obnoxious and awful to others it doesn’t make straight the way of the Lord – it paves the way of Jesus Christ with nails.

So let us take to heart and try to live Paul’s advice first given to the Christian people of Thessalonica nearly 2,000 years ago, paraphrased:

“Keep your heart light and joyful. Pray all the time. Be thankful for at least something, no matter what is going on. Be careful not to follow every whim, every desire. Hold on to what is good and stay away from evil. Christ will help you and make you grow in holiness and peace because he said he would, and you can count on him.” If you and I lived by these words, we would indeed be preparing the way of the Lord and making his pathways straight.

Amen.