

Third Sunday of Advent – Year C
(Dec. 17, 2006)

What Are We to Do?

What are we to do? That's what the people ask John the Baptist. Perhaps it's our question, too, on this third Sunday of Advent. What are we to do as we await the coming of the Lord?

John's first answer is that they should help the poor, a familiar theme in the Gospels and particularly in Luke's Gospel. To the tax-collectors and soldiers he says, "Do your job and do it properly." And the same holds true for all of us. What are we to do? Be who we are supposed to be and do what we are supposed to do – to the best of our ability – with the help of God, of course.

The liturgy adds some other things to do: rejoice we are told; don't be anxious; the Lord is nearer than you think; pray!

Rejoice, both the Prophet Zephaniah and Paul tell the people. Rejoice, even in adversity and a time of crisis. The people Zephaniah addresses are still in exile. They are in despair. Paul is writing from his prison cell. He knows he will probably die. But still his faith in God is so great that he can tell his friends at Philippi: rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say rejoice!

A few years ago I read an article about the celebration of the Feast of our Lady of Guadalupe at Nativity Mission Center on Manhattan's lower east side. As Mass begins, trumpets blare, mariachis begin to play, and the people sing, they sing with all their hearts on this, their Feast.

The article points out that this is a Hispanic community, mostly Mexican immigrants and their children. They are poor people, many of them exiles from their own country, separated from loved ones, uncertain of jobs, uncertain of their future. And yet, like Zephaniah, like Paul, they rejoice. They rejoice because in the image of our Lady of Guadalupe they see Mary as a pregnant Mexican peasant woman. A Mexican peasant is about to bring forth their savior and for them, that's a reason to rejoice.

Well, you know, there's some profound spirituality there. They have actualized the mystery of the Incarnation and they see it happening in their

own lives.

In a pregnant Mexican peasant woman whom they call our Lady they see their own desires coming to birth and they realize that, like those exiles in Babylon that Zephaniah addresses, like Paul in his prison cell, against all odds, they have reason to hope and so they rejoice.

And what about us on this third Sunday of Advent? Is our faith strong enough to realize that the Lord is struggling to come to birth in us even as we struggle to bring peace out of the chaos and turmoil that exist in our nation and in our world today? Do we have the same Advent hope as those people celebrating the Feast of our Lady of Guadalupe? And are we preparing to receive the Lord at his coming?

Could we do better than pay attention to John the Baptist, to Zephaniah and to Paul? Let's pray to God today to give us the grace to do what they encourage us to do: to help the poor – that means anyone who needs help and cannot help themselves; to work for peace and reconciliation in a world so desperately in need of both; to be who we are supposed to be and to do what we are supposed to do to the best of our ability with the help of God; to rejoice; to get rid of anxiety; and to pray – to pray – always to pray.