

Many of us have had the experience while listening to the radio or watching TV, a voice interrupts: "We interrupt this program to bring you this important announcement." When we hear such announcement, we stop everything to listen to the news. "Stop!" We have an important announcement today. With all the shopping, the baking, the decorating, and the card-writing of this time - - it sounds strange to hear the prophets speak about **repentance and conversion**. Advent is a time of looking into our hearts. It is a time of looking at what is present there and determining where we are to grow if we are to meet our Lord without fear in our hearts.

People always identified Prophets as persons who foretold the future. Today we come to understand that the prophets were people who help us look into rather than look ahead. Prophets are introduced into the Advent readings because the prophets call us to look into and be prepared when we meet Our Lord either at the end of time or at the time of our death... whichever comes first.

In the First Reading, we meet Isaiah, perhaps the greatest of the Old Testament prophets. He was, fearless and poetic. He describes the ideal leader who was not gifted with health, wealth, and popularity -- but the person who was gifted with wisdom and counsel, strength, and knowledge. As time played out, that prophet was Jesus.

In our Gospel Reading, we meet John the Baptist. He is not the most pleasant person to hear about or visualize. His words are not pleasing to our ears. He is a radical, absolutely, single-minded and ruthless in his pursuit of God's reign in the lives of all. His message is clear and powerful. **Repent and be converted.**

Repentance' is the common translation for the Greek word metanoia, which means not just sorrow for past sins but a **total and radical change of outlook in our relationship with God and other people**. For many, repentance is a word that belongs to yesterday. It is equated with a confessional in the Church. For some, repentance is something that is done when one gets caught. When caught, an individual will often repent by saying a heartfelt "I'm sorry." But repentance is far more than blurting out "I'm sorry" when one gets caught at something deemed wrong by conventional society.

Nor is repentance merely turning over a new leaf. In fact, John the Baptizer gave a strange twist to repentance. In most of Scripture, repentance expresses a variety of ideas: (a) a change of mind, (b) the feeling of regret or remorse. In the New Testament, repentance refers to humankind's need to **"turn away from" and to "turn back" to God**. In this context, repentance mean not only to change one's mind or to feel sorry for one's sins. Instead, **repentance means to turn toward the One who is yet to come**. John the Baptizer wanted his audience to turn their lives toward the Messiah who was just around the corner.

We turn to the one who is to come by a radical change in personal and professional behavior. Many people who identify themselves as Christians do not seem to get it. There is little

difference in moral behavior between people who profess to be Christians and people who don't. There seems to be a widespread misconception among Christians that **we can add Christ to our lives without subtracting sin and even rejecting God's moral law.** Accepting Jesus as one's personal Lord and Savior is accepting God's law.

John the Baptist called the scribes a brood of vipers because they were not prepared to change their attitudes, but they wanted forgiveness and acceptance. John preached change of behavior, before change of belief. For him repentance, turning away from selfishness to a Godly behavior, precedes and accompanies belief.

As we prepare to celebrate the coming of Jesus at Christmas, let us keep in mind the importance of conversion and our faith in Jesus Christ. You will have seen a bumper sticker around this time on several cars, "**Keep Christ at Christmas.**" That is the real message of Advent.

Have you heard about Mary's Dream? *One morning Mary said to Joseph "I had a dream." I don't understand it, but I think it was about a birthday celebration for our son. The people in my dream had been preparing for about six weeks. They had decorated the house and bought new clothes. They'd gone shopping many times and bought many elaborate gifts. It was peculiar, though, because the presents weren't for our son.*

They wrapped them in beautiful paper and stacked them under a tree. Yes, a tree, Joseph, right inside their homes! They'd decorated the tree with sparkling ornaments. There was a figure like an angel on the top of the tree. Everyone was laughing and happy. They gave the gifts to each other, Joseph, not to our son.

I don't think they even knew him. They never mentioned his name. I had the strangest feeling that, if our Jesus had gone to this celebration he would have been intruding. How sad for someone not to be wanted at his own birthday party!

I'm glad it was only a dream. How terrible Joseph, if it had been real! Let us not forget to keep Christ at this Christmas.

God Bless You.