

CHARITY AT CHRISTMAS; CHARITY AND JUSTICE ALWAYS



The spirit of charity and goodwill to all ascends at Thanksgiving and abounds during the Christmas season. While the air becomes cold and the days close in on themselves, our hearts warm to the plight of others and our pocketbooks open to the requests for donations to help our fellow man.

In today's Gospel reading John the Baptist instructs the crowds to share their two cloaks with the person who has none and to share their food with those who are hungry.

Since this is an Advent reading, it seems that John the Baptist was presciently celebrating the Christmas season. Perhaps he was merely getting a jump on his Christmas shopping; when it absolutely, positively has to be there you had to ship early; overnight delivery hadn't been invented yet, not with camels as the foundation for the transportation system.

Luke refers to John the Baptist's audience as "the crowds," a generic term. The everyman. When the tax collectors, a specific occupation, asked what should they do, John answered them, "Stop collecting more than what is prescribed." When "soldiers also asked him, 'And what is it that we should do?' he told them, 'Do not practice extortion, do not falsely accuse anyone, and be satisfied with your wages.'" The least that is expected of many of us is to share our coats and food with those who have none. Depending on your circumstances and where you can affect others (your circle of influence), more is required of you.

There's no record that God or Jesus or John the Baptist or any of the prophets left a specific code of conduct for each profession, not without the overnight delivery business yet established as a viable career opportunity. Often times, we must listen to Scripture and glean the hidden message behind the actual words. Sometimes we discover a new message as our faith, conscience and understanding mature, as our life circumstances change. Almost always, however, the message can be summarized as "Do the Right Thing." If you don't know what the right thing is then pray for the wisdom to know "What Would Jesus Do." In later Gospel readings, we will see that Jesus requires more than sharing or more than the cessation of our destructive behaviors, but also working to create a society where all are respected and none are hungry. We know this society as the Kingdom of God.

There is a well-known story that illustrates the difference between sharing and creating a just society:

A group of villagers notice an abandoned baby floating downstream in the river. They immediately jump in to rescue the child. Before they get back to shore, they notice another baby, and then another, and another. Soon, more babies were seen drowning in the river, and the friends were pulling them out as fast as they could. They began to organize their activities to save the babies as they came down the river. As everyone else was busy in the rescue efforts to save the babies, two of the citizens started to run away along the shore of the river.

"Where are you going?" shouted one of the rescuers. "We need you here to help us save these babies!" As one of the citizens continued running, the other stopped to explain, "We are going upstream to stop whoever is throwing them in! Who can join us?"

The charity approach (rescuing the babies) met an immediate need. The justice approach (stopping the babies from being put in the river in the first place) dealt with the root cause of the problem. Someone needed to educate the others and recruit more citizens to join them upstream.

Neither approach would be enough on its own and without education only a handful would ever think about moving upstream.

In preparation for Christmas, let each of us heed John the Baptist's words, open our hearts, and donate food and clothing to the poor and vulnerable who have little or nothing. For those who are called by the Holy Spirit, also continue your work to build a just society where no one is ever cold or hungry or alone.

(Readings for Third Sunday of Advent)



ARCHDIOCESE
OF PORTLAND
IN OREGON

Office of Life, Justice, and Peace