

Bishop Jaime Soto – Homily for 3rd Sunday of Advent,
December 16, 2012

Following the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School, Newtown Connecticut

In last Sunday's gospel, John was preaching conversion and repentance so as to prepare the way of the Lord. Those who took seriously the preaching of John the Baptist asked a very important question in today's gospel. The question we should ask: "What should we do?" This question springs from the anticipation, the restless expectation that John's words had stirred up in the minds and hearts of those who listened to him. "What should we do to prepare for the Lord's coming?"

John gave strong, stern counsel to two groups who were listening to him, tax collectors and soldiers. These were two feared as well as despised groups in the time of Jesus. They were seen as ruthless oppressors. John did not seem to fear them. Far from fearing them, he severely admonished them to act justly toward others. John was urging them to repent from their sinful, unjust ways. What he asked them to do was morally and humanly right. Yet his reason for the strong words to them was more than a high regard for justice. John pushes them as well as all who listened to him because the Christ was coming. The Messiah was coming to save the world and his coming would be a judgment against all those who oppressed the world. John was not just concerned for making a better world. He was preparing the people for the coming of Christ. This was his burning desire. This was his determined passion. His messianic zeal unsettled his listeners. So when they asked, "What should we do?" they had their minds set on the coming of Christ. They were changing their lives to prepare the way of the Lord.

Since Friday, every newscast weighs and wearies our souls with the details of another senseless, bloody tragedy, the slaughter of innocent children and their adult guardians at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut. Such blind, brutal rage smothered tender lives. It has left the whole nation shuddering at the horror and gripped by grief at the unfathomable violence. The magnitude of Connecticut's tragedy is but another reminder of the pervading culture of violence that destroys too many young lives and diminished their horizon of opportunities.

This alone buckles our spirits. Yet even without this chilling nightmare, we still have so much anxious uncertainty over the gnawing fears of too many unemployed, too little economic growth and the still unresolved fiscal cliff.

Families worry. Politicians and community leaders wonder what to do. How do we create a better tomorrow, a healthier future, a more sane society? These numbing, unnerving matters demand moral resolve melded with creative responses from citizens as well as leaders. Still, St. John the Baptist pushes Christians to see through these smoldering shadows to a deeper ache and a more worrisome wound in the human heart. Beyond the just and necessary human endeavor to build a better world, John the Baptist reminds us of our faith in the coming of Christ. The urgent question of the today's gospel, "What should we do?" is not just a response to the problems of today. John lifts our souls to the reason that gives reason and rhyme to what we do as people of faith. To be a Christian is to always be mindful of Christ even as we struggle against the gathering gloom. A Christian looks to the coming of Christ especially in the moments of darkness or uncertainty, not as a reason to withdraw. He is the reason to enter even more deeply into the work of salvation because we know that is where we will find him.

The words of Paul to the Philippians, in the second reading, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice!" seem shockingly silly in the wake of the recent tragedy and the lingering worries of so many. His words did not come from some otherworldly naiveté. He was no stranger to disappointment, distress or tragedy. Rejoicing in the Lord was his strength. Rejoicing in the Lord always was his salvation. He offered this salvation to the Philippians and to us because to rejoice in the Lord gives hope even in the middle of the murky madness of the world.

Management gurus often tell their listeners that good leadership knows how to distinguish what is important from what is urgent. Many bad decisions come from reacting to urgent issues and losing sight of what is most important. John the Baptist is not a guru. He is a prophet and he called us to a sane sanctity when he reminded us, "one mightier than I is coming. I am not worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

Jesus the Christ, the one of whom John foretold, has come. He has baptized us with the Holy Spirit and fire. It is the fire of hope, the fervor of charity, the undiminished flame of truth. We are to keep that burning until he comes again. So before we prepare to approach the altar to receive the Eucharist with hands outstretched and eager, we repeat with greater earnest those words whose meaning is so much more needed now: “Deliver us, Lord, we pray from every evil, graciously grant peace in our days, that, by the help of your mercy, we may be always free from sin and safe from all distress, as we await the blessed hope and the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ. ... For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours now and forever.”