

## Homily for Sunday, December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020 – 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent



I said last weekend that meerkats, much like Timon the meerkat in the Lion King, were going to be my guides this Advent. I am still holding to that. I said that because the meerkat is a symbol of alertness, of attentiveness, of being awake. On my better/holier days, I try to be alert, attentive and awake to what God is doing in my life

and what God is doing in the life of the world. And then, hopefully, responding to God's promptings with Gospel values.

The second reason I like Timon, the meerkat, is because he is not the main character in the story, but he is a wisdom figure. Similarly, John the Baptist does not see himself, nor does he want us to see him, as the main character. But, he is a wisdom figure. Wisdom figures are never the protagonists, the main characters, in any story, but their role is absolutely essential. Wisdom figures are often pictured as small in stature, but their truth looms larger than life. Mother Teresa, all 5 feet of her on a good day, was a wisdom figure. Wisdom figures in all the world's traditions tend to make cameo appearances, speak their truth, and exit the stage almost as quickly as they appeared. You and I have had such people in our lives. Sometimes they were only with you for the shortest of time, yet they left an impression, or dropped a pearl of wisdom on your lap, that serves you well to this very day. You might actually forget them, but you never forget the contribution they brought to your life.

Greek, Roman, and Native North American mythologies always include a gnome, a talking fox, a child, an angel, a messenger of some sort that points the main character in the right direction, and then they vanish. That is the role R2D2 and C3PO play in Star Wars, which is mythological. They are John the Baptist figures, even though wisdom figures pre-dated John the Baptist by thousands of years. Wisdom figures always live on the fringe but point us to what is essential and important in life. They are not the real thing, and in their humility they know it, but they point us to the real thing. The mentally challenged that I lived and worked with

at L'Arche pointed me to truths that no one else could have and no one else had access to. They were not the moon but the finger that pointed to the moon.

John the Baptist really was such a person. He emptied himself of his self-importance, like Jesus did, and like St. Francis of Assisi did 1200 years later. Self-importance come from the ego which resides in the head, the control tower. Maybe the fact that John the Baptist is eventually beheaded is the ultimate proof of his self-emptying. Without a head, there is no more ego! John the Baptist, as you remember, was the son of a priest, Zechariah, and was named by an angel. He was born into self-importance but gave it all away. This is what we call "chosen poverty." John the Baptist, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Mother Teresa, were not born poor. Theirs was a chosen poverty. They believed that the poor were wisdom figures who had a message for the world. But unless John, Francis, and Teresa descended to the level of the poor and became poor themselves, they would not be in a position to hear or receive what the poor had to offer to the world. Jesus knew this truth as well. He descended from the riches of heaven to become poor so that he could hear us and love us in our own poverty. That descent from heaven is what we celebrate in the Feast of Christmas.

Getting back to John the Baptist, he became a pointer to the one who is supposed to have ultimate importance in our lives...Jesus. John said, "***The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me.***" Whenever I think of John the Baptist, I think of a phrase spoken by the keynote speaker at a stewardship conference I went to, who said, "The main thing, is to know the main thing, and to keep the main thing the main thing." John the Baptist knew the main thing was Jesus.

I think the poor in Jesus' time, in our current time, and at every point in history, have held a prophetic message that we need. Maybe that is why the very first thing Jesus told us to kick off his public ministry was: "***Blessed are the poor; yours is the kingdom of heaven.***" Poverty, without glamourizing it in any way, is the port of entry into the Kingdom, the Kingdom which belongs to the poor. In some bizarre way, I think COVID-19, is making us all poor. For all the pain and suffering it has caused, it has also been a finger pointing to the real. God is not punishing us, but I think God is telling us something. Perhaps the overarching values guiding our collective lives are not independence, self-sufficiency, or materialism as we may have thought. There is a fancy, theological term called "existential poverty." What it means is: at the most basic level of our existence, we are all poor. We are all

dependent on others and on God more than we ever realized. Perhaps this pandemic is showing us that dependency is not a bad thing.

Fr. Ron Rolheiser writes in one of his books, Sacred Fire, the following: ***Hundreds of years before Jesus' birth, the great Jewish prophets had already coined this mantra: "The quality of your faith will be judged by the quality of justice in the land; and the quality of justice in the land will be judged by how the weakest and most vulnerable groups in society (widows, orphans, strangers) fare while you were alive"...The idea was that our standing with God depended not just on our private prayer and integrity but also on how we stand with the poor...In effect, Jesus told us that nobody will get into heaven without a letter of reference from the poor*** (Sacred Fire, p. 48-49).

As we continue on in Advent, and cope with this pandemic, perhaps some fringe players living on the edge, like the poor, will be calling us to leave our comfort zone and go to a place where wisdom resides. The poor cannot usually come to us but want us to go to them. If we do go to them, they will guide us into the acceptance of our own poverty and our need for God. And together, we can all say, ***"Come, Lord Jesus."***

Fr. Phil