

Today's Gospel has two parts. The first is an attempt by Luke to set the stage for the arrival of John the Baptist on the world scene. He uses a number of anchoring points to do this – and yes, Luke is a name dropper. Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Annas, Caiaphas, all the best known dictators and despots of the time. Luke's message is clear – when things look the worst, when you long for peace and justice, don't despair. God notices. Here's what God saw in 30 AD. He saw a world that was broken, a world of domination by secular, often blood-thirsty rulers. He saw abject poverty, slavery, starvation. He saw religious people acting in petty, self-serving ways. He saw religious law perverted to a cookbook for salvation, every man for himself, forget the people in the ditch – leave them to the Samaritans. He saw suffering. He saw his *children* suffering. And this, quite simply, was unacceptable to God.

The second part of today's Gospel is how God acted. Notice that the word of God did not come to Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Annas, or Caiaphas. Or did it? I believe that the word of God comes to all of us all of the time, including our world leaders and governors. The irony, of course, is that our ability to hear the word of God is apparently *inversely* related to the amount of power, wealth, and authority that we have. This pattern is not 100 percent true – there are exceptions we can name over the centuries – but these exceptions are so notable that we are generally shocked when a ruler actually listens and acts on God's word. Why is it so difficult to hear God when we are successful?

I have met many successful people in my life. There are many successful people in this Church today. If there's one common trait I've seen in all of you, it is your *confidence* in your ability to make things happen, to make a difference. It's a wonderful trait, don't get me wrong, but as is true with wonderful traits, there's a huge shadow effect as well. The shadow is a trap, a trap the devil loves to trigger with successful people, and here it is:

The trap is in believing that your success is due solely to your efforts. *My success is due solely to my efforts.* When we buy into this illusion, we become just like Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Annas and Caiaphas. We think that the world is all about us. And when we buy that lie, we stop listening to the word of God. But God doesn't stop offering his Word – God persists and as we see over and over in the Scriptures, the people who do listen are the poor, the unqualified, the lowly, and the weirdos. Enter John the Baptist. And what does John the Baptist say to the rest of us? Wake up!

Repent! Change your direction? Make a u-turn! You're going the wrong way!

So here we are, in the year 2018, listening once again to the words of John the Weirdo Baptizer – are we listening? Hmmmm, let me guess. You're successful, I'm successful. The odds, therefore, are poor. Now don't get defensive – it's very difficult to consider a path change when things are going reasonably well in our lives. Why should I repent (don't you hate that word)? Let me suggest a different way of hearing God's word. Let's see what's changed in you in the past year, for better or for worse.

It's very difficult for most people to see God in the present moment. We're too distracted by the world to consider that something spiritual or non-corporeal could be asking for our attention. So let's make it easier and check the rearview mirror. Look back over your life in the past year and identify the signs. When were you the happiest in the past year? Perhaps an occasion, an anniversary, an achievement, or more likely, a simple moment of love received or love reciprocated. Practically anything to do with my granddaughter qualifies for me, but I'd also add moments of sudden awareness of God's presence, usually in the prison or here at the Parish. Think back on your own experiences of happiness and joy. Let's call these moments *consolations*. Now look back again at the moments in the past year when you were unhappy, depressed, anxious, or fearful. Maybe an economic downturn or a serious illness plagued you at some time. I can tell you that the hardest moments for me were those times when I found myself at odds with a good friend or a close relative, and words were exchanged that I'd prefer to have back. Let's call these moments *desolations*. Now do the math. In the past year, have you seen more consolations or desolations in your life? If the desolations exceed the consolations, what does this tell you? If the consolations exceed the desolations, is this an indicator of good progress?

Now wait, you'll say. Some of those desolations were outside of my control – how can these indicate anything? Great question. Consider this – everything that happens to us in life can be turned into either a consolation or a desolation in the moment of occurrence. Everything. Even illness and death. It's all about our *reaction* to the event. When good things happen, we are quick to say thank you to God. When bad things happen, can we do the same? Ouch, that's much harder. When good things happen, we buy into God's plan – who wouldn't? But if you recognize that the world is

*always* about God's plan, and God's plan is *always* radically good for you, even if well disguised, then you'll rarely experience desolation in your life. Whatever happens is somehow, some way, in God's hands. In the end, the difference between consolation and desolation is the answer to a simple question: *can you trust God?*

Repentance is born of an awareness that the path you are on, the engrained reactions you have to every event, good and bad, needs to be re-examined. Do you like being outraged? Do you enjoy being resentful? Do you get a kick out of taking offense at every perceived slight? Is judgment your number one response to every new situation? As a friend of mine wisely put it, add some doubt into your life. Work hard to see a situation from the other person's point of view. Maybe they're having a bad day. Maybe you are being challenged to be the light of Christ to them. Are you up to the task?

Let's summarize. The key to happiness is recognizing that the world is not about you.

Sin is thinking that it is. Welcome to the world of disappointment and despair.

Repentance starts with discernment, ideally in the very moment, but easier as an examination of our immediate past. Add up the consolations and desolations. Every consolation is a blessing. Every desolation, seen in its immediacy, feels like God is against us. If we trust God, though, we can decide that the desolation is simply a consolation in disguise. In this is the secret to happiness. The world is God's, and He is in charge. Thank God!!