

WHAT SHOULD I DO? (Luke 3:10-18)
Homily given by Fr. Dennis Koliński, SJC
St. Peter's Church in Volo
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To not recognize that our times are afflicted with a host of problems on an unprecedented scale, one would either have to be blind or living an illusion. Many of the maladies of our present-day society are the result of things that man has never had to deal with before because they are the product of technological advancements that didn't exist even 40-50 years ago. In some areas, technology is advancing so rapidly that societies and cultures cannot keep pace with it, in many cases finding themselves unable to adequately cope with the degree of change that is being relentlessly thrust upon them.

But one other thing, which makes our times so different, is the attitude of radical individualism that permeates so much of present-day western society. Everyone wants to be his own person, and in so doing, make up one's own rules, make up one's own morality, and have one's own personal way of looking at the world, even if it doesn't conform with reality, while demanding that no one has a right to tell you that you might be wrong. You might call it the Frank Sinatra syndrome so well encapsulated in one of his famous hits.

"I've travelled each and every highway. And more, much more than this,
and I did it my way. ...
there were times, I'm sure you knew, when I bit off more than I could chew,
but through it all, when there was doubt, I ate it up and spit it out.
I faced it all and I stood tall and did it my way."

And because of this perspective, many people also don't have the connectedness with others that people once had in the past. Relationships are often shallow or based on all the wrong things. And when something doesn't go right, instead of trying to solve the

real problem, there are those, who prefer to just move on to something or someone else. Things and one's own desires become so much more important than relationships.

And because of this super individualistic sense of independence, we have become a society of introverted people, always looking for what will satisfy "my" needs, a society that often looks at situations, and sometimes even people, from the perspective of "what I can get out of it." The result is a society that thinks that by getting what one thinks one needs, a person will be more happy, when in fact the more one "gets," the more elusive happiness seems to be. A person begins to think that he just hasn't fulfilled his "needs" adequately, so he needs to strive harder to "get" more. But it is only an endless circle that never reaches fulfillment. We see this all too clearly with alcohol and drugs, sex, money, power and influence. But it can happen with anything, even things as innocent as sports, TV, exercise and the Internet. There is never enough and one keeps grabbing for more and in the process, ruining relations, breaking families, hurting people by treating them as a means to an end, so that one's philosophy of life becomes: "What can you do for me?" That's why so many marriages today don't last. Instead of true sacrificial love, they are often based more on a feeling of infatuation, which comes down to: "You make me feel good." Then, when the warm fuzzy feeling disappears, as it always does when the routine of daily life sets in, it becomes more about "what my spouse isn't doing for me," rather than, "what I should be doing for my spouse."

Today's gospel presents us with an entirely different picture. In the encounter with John the Baptist we have some of those people from the ancient world, who based their lives on that same principle—tax collectors and soldiers, both types of people that took enormous advantage of other people to satisfy their own needs. Tax collectors took

more money from people than they should have. Soldiers practiced extortion, made false accusations and looted to compensate for the wages they thought they should have received. It was because of this that they were treated with disdain by the Jews. But, somehow, they saw something compelling in John the Baptist. Having taken advantage of people their entire lives, they saw before them a man, who was totally disinterested in his own needs, a man who had no interest in what they could do for him. Perhaps, they saw in him truth and goodness unlike anything they had ever seen before. He was authentic and uncompromisingly truthful.

These people, who before had as their motto, “what can you do for me?” were now asking John, “Teacher, what should we do?” Perhaps, they saw for the first time in their lives that true happiness in life derives not what others can do for them but what they could do for others. True happiness comes from giving ourselves to others so that they can be happy. Our happiness, then, derives from the fact that we have made someone else happy. Instead of selfishness, it is the sharing of oneself with others. This was the essence of John the Baptist’s call to conversion: “Repent!” How? By being less selfish and thinking more about others—thinking about God and one’s neighbor more than about oneself.

“God [wanted] to come and dwell with the people of every time and place, and he [called] them to co-operate with him in the work of salvation. And how? ... [John told the people to straighten the roads, so] we must *straighten* injustices, *fill* the void with goodness, mercy, respect and understanding, [John told the people to level the mountains, so we must] *bring low* pride, barriers and violence, and *make smooth* all that prevents

people from living a free and dignified life. Only in this way can we prepare to celebrate Christmas in an authentic way.”¹

If each one of us takes a good hard look at our lives, we will see that so many of the problems that we’ve encountered in life have been the result of a “what you can do for me?” philosophy. For by focusing only on what “I” need, a person forgets about what “you” need. Sometimes, our problems are the result of others around us, who are operating on that philosophy. But we have to be honest and admit that sometimes we have been the ones thinking that way. St. Jose Maria Escriva once said, “Is it not true that your gloominess and bad temper are due to your lack of determination in breaking the subtle snares laid by your own disordered desires?”²

Once, when St. Philip Neri was playing cards, someone asked what he would do if he learned that he was going to die shortly. He replied that he would continue playing cards because the best preparation for the Lord's coming at any moment is to be doing what we ought to be doing and at that moment he was supposed to be playing cards. In these last two weeks before Christmas, therefore, we should prepare by asking, “Teacher, what ought I be doing?” One of the primary ways that we should prepare ourselves for Christmas is by spending more time saying, “what should I do?” rather than “what can you do for me?”

Many Jews didn't recognize the Messiah when He came into the world because they were expecting a great warrior king, who would liberate them from the Romans. They were asking: “Messiah—what can you do for us?” John the Baptist prepared people for His coming by showing people what they had to do for Him. And it was only those, who had no preconceptions or demands on who that Messiah should be, that recognized

Him. The Second Person of the Trinity could have said, “what can you people do for me, the God Almighty?” Instead, He came as a small vulnerable child saying, “What should I do to save these poor fallen creatures, whom I love so much?”

Just like Lent, Advent is a time to put things right. We wear purple to remind everyone that this is a period of preparation and a period of penance. But halfway through Advent, the Church softens the harsh purple to rose and brings back flowers to the altar to give us consolation that the end is not far away, exclaiming in today’s liturgy, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice! . . . The Lord is near.” Yes. The Lord is near and we should make haste to prepare for Him, leveling the hills in our lives that create barriers, making straight the roads in our lives rather than maneuvering around others for our advantage, filling in the valleys, so that it will be easier for them to cross over to us. Instead of asking what others can do for me, we should make haste to prepare for Our Lord and ask Him, “Master, tell me what I should do?”

Hom-Lk3,10-18

¹ John Paul II, *Angelus*, December 7, 1997.

² <http://www.ewtn.com/devotionals/inspiration.htm#13>.