

### THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT [C]

Zephaniah 3: 14 – 18

Philippians 4: 4 – 7

Luke 3: 10 – 18

On December 5 1968, at the age of 18, I became a Catholic.

Like a lot of converts, I was very zealous: I was also quite narrow minded about my faith; rather blinkered in fact.

Looking back with that wonderful thing called hindsight, I think I became too tied up with the outward shell of the Church – the sort of smells and bells bits – I didn't come to know Jesus personally and intimately.

There was a vocations crisis when I joined the Church – times haven't changed really, have they? – so I thought it my duty to become a Priest; as did some well-meaning Catholics I knew.

The Diocese must have been desperate, because it thought I had the makings of a Priest, and accepted me for training!

Again with hindsight, in my heart of hearts, I think I knew I didn't have a vocation to Priesthood.

But still, I felt it was my duty, so gritted my teeth, and got on with it, for a time anyhow.

Well, if I had got through the training, with that sort of attitude I'd have made a lousy Priest!

Thankfully, for your sake and mine, I came to realise I didn't have a priestly vocation.

Eventually I met Chris, my Wife, who was an Evangelical Anglican; she'd given her life to Jesus when she was 12!

So, thanks to her, I too came to know Him as my personal Saviour and friend: I also got to know the Bible, and that has given me a life-long love for the Scriptures, for which I'll always be grateful.

But, as they say, the Lord moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform: for, although I knew I didn't have a priestly vocation, I felt I still had a vocation in some way.

Well, to cut a long story short, Chris became a Catholic, and here I am as a Deacon!!

The Lord obviously wanted me in the Ordained Ministry, but not as a Priest, as a Deacon.

Vocation; being called by the Lord to be the person He wants you to be, means doing what He wants you to do.

Not what you might think He wants you to be; or what you think it's your duty to be, as I did when I was 18.

To follow Jesus is meant to be a joyful calling; just as Paul says in Philippians: "Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again – rejoice!" [Phil. 4: 4](#)

I think if someone had asked me then how I saw God, it would have been as a distant, authoritarian figure; a bit like the way John the Baptist describes Jesus in the Gospel: "He is ready to separate the chaff from the wheat with his winnowing fork. Then he will clean up the threshing area, gathering the wheat into his barn but burning the chaff with never-ending fire." [Lk. 3: 17](#)

We may like to hope that Jesus is, 'Gentle Jesus, meek and mild,' yet afraid that He's more like the avenging God we mistakenly think John the Baptist is talking about.

Yes, Jesus is totally opposed to sin and hypocrisy; the Lord cares passionately about how we live and act; but mercy is at the very heart of God: as this description of God by the Prophet Hosea shows us: "I was the one who took care of them. I led them with kindness and love. I was to them like a person who lifts a little child to their cheek. I bent down and fed them." [Hos. 11: 4](#)

We can't pay just lip service to our Christian calling; it has to permeate everything we do and say, otherwise it's just an empty shell; a veneer.

This is exactly what John the Baptist said to those who came to him to be plunged under the waters of the River Jordan as a sign that they wanted to change their lives.

John isn't saying that God will send us to hell if we take one step out of line: God is overflowing with mercy.

He's telling us that the threshing floor is our lives, and that the Lord wants to clear out anything that stands in the way of our relationship of love with Him.

And that's exactly what the Old Testament reading today is saying: "For the Lord your God is living among you. He is a mighty saviour. He will take delight in you with gladness. With his love, he will calm all your fears." Zeph. 3: 17

When we repent of our sins, and come before the Lord seeking His forgiveness, then His final word is not of anger, but of love and mercy.

We don't stand condemned; we stand loved with a love too great for words, because the Lord cradles us in the arms of His mercy.

What I'd like to say to you is; don't make the mistake I did when I became a Catholic of, in essence, entirely missing the point of what being a Christian should be.

Don't be afraid of Jesus: let Him quiet you with His love: "Then [as Paul says] you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus." Phil. 4: 4 & 7