

Shortly after I became a lawyer, I ran into a high school classmate at the county courthouse. He'd started a business. I asked if he was going to St. Francis Church in his town and he said to me: "Oh, I don't believe in that stuff anymore, John. I only go to church because it's good for business."

I wish I could have seen the look on my face. I was stunned. I realized how naïve I'd been. I'd always thought if you were involved in a parish, you were sincere about your faith. It shook me up to realize there could be a few parishioners who aren't; who have their own agenda. They don't care about the parish or its people; they'll just use it. They're frauds! Snakes in the church!

Brood of vipers – as John the Baptist said in today's Gospel. He attacks the Pharisees and Sadducees for their phoniness, acting religious in front of people, but corrupt on the inside. He attacks their insincerity, that they need to repent, need to change their minds and their ways. Unlike my former friend at the courthouse, they believed in God, but had deceived themselves into thinking they were still God's People, just because they followed the rules that could be seen by others.

They appeared to be models of religion, but it was superficial; their faith didn't touch their hearts. They did not practice compassion, charity, mercy and forgiveness, the virtues most important to our God. They closed in on themselves, became rigid, and excluded Jews who didn't think like them.

They got an earful from John. His message is that salvation comes from good living, not from belonging to the right group. Just like there's no guarantee of salvation for Christians, just because we're baptized or go to church.

That's where John speaks to us today. We can fall into that same trap: go to Mass every weekend, communion and confession and then think we're model Catholics. We can make that mistake of thinking it's all about acting pious and saying prayers. But our faith is about much more than that: we're to be active followers of Jesus Christ, building up his Kingdom through our daily encounters with other people. Otherwise we bear no fruit.

John the Baptist says much the same thing. He doesn't just criticize the Pharisees and Sadducees; he gives them a remedy. He says: "Produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance." Their privileges are meant for service to others.

John is preaching that God wants to penetrate our interior lives and renew us. Open up all the aspects of our lives, so the Holy Spirit can purify, change and renew us.

John says "the ax lies at the root of the trees." John wants us to get down to the root causes of our personal problems, that become roadblocks to our discipleship. It's not so much about changing the world, as it is the conversion of individuals who will bring about that change, working to build God's kingdom on earth.

This means examining our relationships in our blood family and our social circle; our attitude towards the poor and our enemies; our political assumptions. It's all fair game for God to enter into.

John would have us ask ourselves questions like: what's unholy in my life that I keep hanging on to? What routines do I need to abandon? What do I have to let go of that I identify with? What do I think I'm entitled to? Who or what do I feel I have to control? What holds me back and puts a boundary on my relationship with God? What selfish habits and desires do I have to empty out?

Repentance of this scope gives God a free hand to work in our lives and in the lives of others. Then God can work through our words, example and actions, and bring the Light of Christ into the lives of those around us. God has a future for us repentant sinners.

Second Sunday of Advent, December 8, 2019, Fr. John Ozella