

From Vision to Action

As the Teacher was speaking with a group of children, a soap-maker attempted to embarrass her. “How can you claim that religion is good and valid when there is so much suffering and evil in the world? What good are all the books and sermons that your religion has produced?”

The Teacher motioned to a small child to move through the crowd. “This is Eric,” the Teacher said. “He is three. He is also dirty. I ask you, what good is soap when Eric and hundreds of children like him are dirty. How can you pretend that soap is effective?”

“What a foolish argument,” the soap-maker protested. “If soap is to be effective it must be used.”

“Precisely,” the Teacher answered. “If the teachings of our Master are to be effective, they must be used.”

*-- William White, *Stories for the Journey**

This traditional Hasidic tale highlights the message of the Scriptures proclaimed today. The powerful images offered by the prophet Isaiah, the words of the Psalm and Paul’s letter to the Romans stand in stark contrast to the harsh images of the Gospel.

The vision of a world of peace and justice will not magically appear. John the Baptist boldly throws down the harsh gauntlet of reality

*Produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance.
...every tree that does not bear good fruit
will be cut down and thrown into the fire.*

Just waiting patiently for Isaiah's beautiful images to magically materialize is not what the Good News or this Season of Advent is about. We must each individually accept the responsibility for being co-creators of the world of peace and justice the prophet envisions. Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world is essential to the Church's mission. And since we are the Church, it becomes the responsibility of each one of us to embrace that vision and act upon it.

The task is first to embrace the vision. We have to ask ourselves whether Isaiah's vision of justice is compatible with our own. Do we embrace the poor and the afflicted as the center of

our efforts to build the Reign of God in our time? Can we see Isaiah's vision of the poor in our inner-cities or in the impoverished villages of the Third World? Do the immigrants in our own day reflect Isaiah's image of "the land's afflicted"? If we are to accept the challenge of John the Baptist to "produce good fruit," these questions must be addressed. This is the very challenge we face today. Our faith calls us to see the world differently.

How do we accomplish this? I have always found that trying to see the world through the eyes of the poor forces me to a change of attitude. Recall that God became one like us for just this reason. Jesus was born into the fullness of our humanity in all its messiness so that we might understand how we are to live and love. We are challenged to take Christ's example and make it work for us. Perhaps that might mean my taking a deliberate, conscious walk through a shopping mall with the eyes of a poor person, who would not be able to purchase anything I would see.

Or it might mean I would go back in time and become my father arriving at Ellis Island and feeling the fear, the uncertainty and the alienation that comes with being a stranger in a strange land.

None of this should be done as a guilt trip, but rather as a glimpse into the way Jesus sees the world, of being able to be more like the one we come to embrace in this Eucharist.

Otherwise the vision offered by the Scriptures today could run the risk of becoming as useless as soap to little Eric. We have to put the Word of God to use if we expect to achieve the promise it offers. This Eucharist Banquet we gather now to celebrate as a family of faith has the power to energize us for just that task, so that as we leave here our voices will be like John's crying out in the desert out there, "Prepare the way of the Lord!"

To that let the Church say "Amen!"