

Today's readings provide three powerful spotlights to draw our attention to dimensions of the Christmas season that we might overlook.

John the Baptist is a familiar part of Advent along with the Advent wreath, Christmas music in the stores, collections of food or toys for those in need, get-togethers with family and friends, all the features that make up our Advent season.

By contrast to this, though, John the Baptist appears in the desert calling us to repent because the Lord is near. We prefer the warm and peaceful picture Isaiah draws in today's first reading, "the wolf will be the guest of the lamb, and the calf and the young lion will walk together with a little child to guide them. That situation seems to be Paradise.

Enter John the Baptist dressed in camel's hair saying to the Pharisees, "You brood of vipers. Who told you to run away from the wrath to come? Prove that you mean to reform." That is a very strong message and looks unkind for Christmas wishes. It is important that we have John the Baptist at this time of year. After all, can we know the real joy of salvation if we feel no need of being saved?

Many people, almost all of us as well, like the easier way. They want a Christmas without Advent, an Easter without Lent, happiness without sacrifice, peace without justice, or heaven without conversion of life. John reminds us of the importance of reform, that Christmas is not just a holiday season but a moment to renew ourselves in the power and grace of Jesus Christ. The first powerful spotlight is the call to reform!

The Old Testament prophet Isaiah shines a second light as he paints a picture of harmony. These words might seem oddly out of place this year when so much of the world gets in different kinds of conflict. What of Isaiah's vision today? Isaiah's light shows us that the reign of God and His peace is always a possibility. Conflict and tension do not have to be the last word. Every generation, including our own, has a chance for peace.

In our generation, the past does not have to decide our future. Are we willing to make the effort to be agents of that different path, that different way of living? If we want a world of harmony, are we willing to sacrifice our pride to establish it? If we want a world of peace, are we willing to be peacemakers? If we want a world of honesty, are we willing to be truth-speakers? If we want a world where human dignity is respected, are we willing to respect the dignity of all people, including those we don't like? If we want a world where human life is respected, are we willing to stand for the dignity of all human life from conception to natural death? Isaiah's light reminds us that the peace of the kingdom is always a possibility for every generation.

The third light comes from the words of St. Paul to the Romans, "Welcome one another as Christ welcomed you." How did Christ welcome us?

To attempt or to try to answer this question, we imagine the Trinity seated in heaven, looking at mankind below. The Trinity saw in the human race the image of God savagely deformed by sins and decided to redeem and save it. In that way, the human race has been restored. God's love shows itself not in embracing saints but in saving sinners.

If God so loved us, how much should we imitate that love? That's the third light from today's readings. Advent and Christmas are times to reach out to the difficult people in our life and try to see in them what Christ sees in them. Maybe we can try this season to welcome them as Christ welcomes us.

These three powerful lights from our readings take us beneath the surface of this season to show us its inner renewing power.

Maybe this Christmas will not bring complete peace to our world but it can bring peace to our life. That is always a good place to start.