**3rd Sunday of Advent – Cycle B**

Isaiah 61: 1-2a, 10-11; I Thes 5: 16-24; John 1: 6-8, 19-28

December 16/17, 2017

Do you remember that Gospel story where Jesus enters the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth, and takes the scroll and reads the reading? (Lk 4: 16-30) Our first reading was what he read, and the people didn’t accept him or what he said. Jesus announced to them, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, anointed me, to free captives, heal broken hearts, and gladden those weighed down by poverty.” (Is 61: 1ff) They thought they knew who he was, the son of a carpenter, but they really didn’t. In fact, they wanted to run him out of town. Jesus told them, “Who you think I am, I am not, and because you know me not, you are angry with me and want to do me violence.” In another place in the Scriptures, Jesus tells the people, “If only you knew who it is that is speaking to you, you would rejoice.” (Lk 19: 41ff)

In our Gospel today, we hear people asking John the Baptist, “Who are you? Elijah? A prophet?” They were confused. They didn’t have faith; they couldn’t see with eyes of faith. What did John say to them? “I am not the Christ! I am only preparing you to recognize him.” (Jn 1: 19ff)

Yes, it is important to know Jesus, to recognize him and encounter him, as Pope Francis reminds us. To know who he really is we need the eyes of faith. At Christmas, we recognize him easily as a little baby in the manger. It is somehow easy for us to imagine Jesus as the Child of Bethlehem. We recognize him as the Son of Mary and the foster son of Joseph. We recognize him as the one who died on the Cross for us and rose from the dead and ascended into heaven.

But it is equally important that we recognize him when he comes to us today. He comes now. He is present now. He comes every day into our lives. This is not just a sentimental statement. It is very real. Do we recognize him today? Do we see him? Will we know him? Will we encounter him today?

We don’t come to Mass regularly because we don’t recognize Jesus there. We don’t go to confession regularly because we don’t recognize Jesus there. We don’t look for an encounter with a real person in the sacraments and we tend to think of them as rituals or obligations or ways of getting something for ourselves. What if we were to change our attitude and look with the eyes of faith and see the sacraments as opportunities to know Jesus?

We look at the person we find most difficult to love as a problem or someone who causes us pain and distress. What if we saw that person through the eyes of faith as an opportunity to know Jesus and recognize him?

We hesitate to give our time and talent to parish life because we think if we get involved it will only demand for and more of us and we will not be appreciated. What if we looked at our parish as the Body of Christ here in this town, the place where we encounter Jesus in his Real Presence in the Eucharist and in each other?

Advent is a time for us to prepare to live out our faith serving others, not just ourselves. It is not just a time for personal piety and warm memories (although these are good in themselves). Advent is a time for purification, for turning away from our sins that are obstacles that keep us from knowing Jesus as he comes into our lives today. It is a time for removing the sins that keep us from our mission and keep us stuck in self-centeredness. We must remove the obstacles between us and God so we might see Jesus who comes into the world.

If only we would see in the Church the coming of Jesus, the presence of Christ in the world today, we would not reduce each other to objects to be managed but people to be loved, and we would eagerly go and accomplish the plan God has for us.

How well do you know Jesus? St. Paul said in our second reading that to know Jesus is to know happiness. Do you want to be happy? Recognize Jesus. Know him. Encounter him. Know him in the sacraments and rejoice. Know him in the poor and be happy. Know him in our parish and we will thrive as a local community of faith.