

Welcome, everyone, as we gather to celebrate this Eucharist. A special welcome to anyone who is new to the parish, or just passing through. You have found yourself among a group of sinners who have found mercy in our Lord Jesus Christ, and we gather to worship and adore him.

Some of you may know, but some of you may not, a little bit about St. John Vianney. He was a French priest who lived in the 19th century, and who had the amazing gift from God of being able to read the souls of the penitents who came to him for confession. Before they confessed their sins, he already knew them, and if there was something they omitted in their confession, he reminded them. People would come from everywhere and wait for weeks in order to celebrate the sacrament with him, such was his reputation.

I wonder what it was like, stepping into that confessional as a penitent. He was of course a holy man, with a pastor's heart for his people, and that holiness was undoubtedly attractive, since so many people came to him. But he was not a simple, quiet, timid priest. You can tell this when you read his sermons; he did not mince words at all, and he had no trouble telling people what was in store for them if they did not repent. And so he probably did not sugarcoat it in the confessional, either. Imagine kneeling in front of him, this living saint, having him look you in the eye, and with great love, naming that sin that you are most ashamed of, and

telling you to repent. Stop the acts of unchastity. Stop holding onto unforgiveness. Stop taking your spouse for granted. When he named our sin and even the person in our life associated with it, his words would pierce us straight to the heart, and we would be left there, completely exposed before God, with the choice of whether or not to repent and reform our lives.

That seems to be what is going on in today's gospel. Like St. John Vianney, St. John the Baptist was also, of course, a holy man, one whose holiness was attractive to the point where he had his own following. And he was also very forthright. These individuals in today's gospel approach him and ask the question, "What should I do? What should I do to prepare for the Messiah?" And John answers them, "Repent. Stop extorting from others, stop falsely accusing, stop hoarding your wealth." These words, too, surely pierced them right to the heart.

And yet we hear in the last line of this passage that, exhorting them in many other ways, he preached good news to the people. These exhortations were good news, just as the exhortations of St. John Vianney were good news to his penitents. As difficult as it is, the recognition of our sins and our need for reformation is not something we should resist or resent, because it is, in fact, good news. This recognition is a necessary step on our path to holiness.

We've all heard stories, or perhaps we even know someone ourselves, of people who put off going to the doctor, even if they realize something isn't right. They hope maybe it will go away on its own if they just ignore it, or maybe it's not that big of a deal. They don't want to hear that there is something wrong, because if they knew that, it would mean they would have to change something about the way they live, perhaps give up something they have grown accustomed to. But the end result of that is always worse than it would have been had they addressed the issue at an earlier stage.

It is easy for us to shake our heads at such people for their stubbornness, but we shouldn't do so too quickly, because it is all too easy for us to do the same thing in our spiritual life. If there is an obstacle to our holiness, a pattern of sin that we are continually guilty of committing, avoiding the issue is the worst thing we can do. Ignoring our sins, thinking they will go away on their own, or worse, accepting them as just a part of who we are will only make it worse for us later. Instead, we must go to our Lord now, with humility, acknowledging Him as our Lord and Master, and ask Him, "What should I do? What should I do to prepare for your return? What should I do to grow in holiness?"

Then, when we have been given the answer, when we have examined our conscience and been shown all of the ways we have sullied ourselves with our sins,

we are ready to go to Him in confession, lay bare our souls before Him with contrition, and allow Him to wash them clean away. That is why this is good news. Because once we are aware of those obstacles to holiness, we can begin to defeat them, with God as our strength and our support.

This season of preparation can be a time of great healing and conversion if we just give our Lord room to work in our lives. Let us have the courage to approach Him and ask Him to pierce us to the heart, to reveal to us those things that are keeping us from holiness and then offer them up to Him, so that we can begin to prepare ourselves for His return in glory.