

LOOKING TO SUNDAY®

Sunday, December 16, 2018

The Third Sunday of Advent

This email, entitled Looking to Sunday®, focuses on one or more of the scripture readings for the coming Sunday. It prepares readers to hear God's Word at Mass and it offers a point of reflection to consider in the days leading to Sunday. Looking to Sunday is written by Father Tom Iwanowski.

NEEDED ENCOURAGEMENT!

When a football team is scoring one touchdown after another, its fans go wild. They enthusiastically cheer on their team. The better the team does, the louder the cheering in the stadium.

But a football team is most in need of enthusiastic fans not when it is doing well but when there are fumbles, interceptions, and penalties. It is then the players most need to hear their fans cheering them, encouraging them not to give up.

A football team or any group of people needs encouragement and support the most when things are going badly. That is also true for the Church.

At the present time the Catholic Church is doing poorly. Its sinful fumbles are all too apparent. Some members of the clergy have sexually abused minors and vulnerable adults. Some bishops have not reacted as they should have. There have been cover-ups and a failure to confront sin in the Church.

Today, the Church is hearing little cheering. There is the silence of pain, disbelief, and disappointment. But this is precisely the time the Church needs support and encouragement.

In this Sunday's first reading (Zephaniah 3:14-18), we hear how God encouraged the Jewish people after they had fallen into sin and idolatry. Through the prophet Zephaniah, God offered his people a vision of hope at time when they were in darkness.

Zephaniah announced, "Fear not, O Zion, be not discouraged! The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a mighty savior; he will rejoice over you with gladness, and renew you in his love."

Those words might be seen as the words God is speaking to his Church today. *Fear not, O Church, be not discouraged! The LORD, your God, is in your midst ... he will rejoice over you with gladness, and renew you in his love.*

Another message of encouragement and advice from the heavens, is also heard in Sunday's Second Reading (Philippians 4:4-7). Through the words that Paul wrote to the Philippians, the Church is told, "The Lord is near. Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

Words of encouragement are also found in the title traditionally given to this Third Sunday of Advent. It is called "Gaudete Sunday" or "Rejoicing Sunday" because we are certain the Lord is near.

In the midst of the Church's difficulties, the Lord tells us not to lose hope, but to rejoice that he has not abandoned his Church. He is near.

In addition, the Word of God tells us to be sure we are faithfully living as members of God's Church.

In the Gospel (Luke 3:10-18), we learn that when people ask John the Baptist what they should do in response to his message of repentance, he tells them to be the good people God expected them to be. Soldiers should be fair. Tax collectors should be honest. Those blessed by God should be generous.

That advice is also the Lord's message to us. It encourages us – clergy and laity alike – to be certain that we are living as the good, holy, authentic Christians we promised to be at our baptism.

This Sunday, the scriptures proclaim a message of encouragement from the Lord – a message that the Church especially needs to hear in our day.

Like any team, the Church most needs to hear encouraging words, not when it is doing well, but when it is doing poorly.

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