

The teaching point of the gospel reading today is clear. The coming of the Christ is near, and now is a time for decision. Get ready to meet the Christ. From ages past, the prophet, John the Baptizer, calls us to repentance. "Prepare the way of the Lord," John said. "Make his pathway clear."

The Church, today, is trying to bring a shift in our Advent thinking, away from the penitential and more to the joyful. We are right in doing this, for over the years Advent has become a mini Lent and this is not as it should be. But we cannot deny that this season of waiting to meet Jesus carries a certain penitential air with it. One needs to prepare before standing in the presence of Jesus. John the Baptist tells us that if we are not ready, we had better get ready while we can. "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his pathway clear."

This is a season of waiting on Christ, but more than that it is a season of getting personally ready to meet the Savior face to face. We know that when we stand before Jesus, he will be our judge. He will weigh the life we've lived. He will evaluate us on his divine scale against the weights of love, justice and mercy. It behooves us, therefore, to evaluate our lives now, while we can, and make the necessary corrections. We must remember that we have no claim on God. We can't say to God, "You owe us because Jesus died for us," any more than the ancient Jews could say to God, "You owe us because we are the children of Abraham." We can only hope to say, "God, we loved you as you have told us we must love. We loved you with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind and with all our might, and we loved our neighbor as we love ourselves."

Love, justice and mercy are the standards of God, and God's standard is a final and eternal standard. If love, justice and mercy are our measures, then how do we balance out? Is the life we've lived an acceptable offering to God the Father?

When you answer that you can answer the question, "What repentance is necessary?" What does repentance really mean? Is it to be sorry? Is it to have regret? You know, I never really understood what Eric Segal meant, in his novel, *Love Story*, when he said, "Love means never having to say you are sorry," until I realized that if you are really doing the loving thing, rarely will you have any need to say "I'm sorry." What is the repentance that John the Baptist called for? It is not just being sorry for what you've done? It is not just having regretted that you offended God and your neighbor? The answer to both questions is, "No!" Neither being sorry nor having regret equal repentance. Repentance is more than sorrow and regret. Repentance is about changing things. Repentance is about turning away from things that are wrong, from things that offend, from things driven by ignorance, prejudice and hate. Repentance is turning from wrong, making amends and doing right. Repentance is about turning from a pathological and inappropriate love of self so that you balance respect for self with true concern for others. Ultimately, repentance is acting out your love of God by the way you live your life by living a life that expresses one's love of neighbor.

So Advent is essentially a time for measuring ourselves as disciples. Where we fall short of God's standard, we need to shape up. Advent encourages us to realize that we may not be able to always completely undo the mistakes of the past, but we must do our best to avoid repeating them in the future. Advent is a time to take spiritual inventory and make corrections. Only when we do this are we ready to meet Jesus. *Amen.*