

Three Advent figures:

John the Baptist

Nelson Mandela

Pope Francis

They had three things in common:

- **Called for social reform, the reform of the structures of society**
- **Called for conversion of heart**
- **Conversion began with themselves.**

Today's Gospel shows John the Baptist clashing with the Jewish religious authorities. We are told that the Pharisees and Sadducees were stepping forward to be baptized by John.

These people “did not believe him” ([Mt 21:32](#)), but they came forward anyway, boasting of the claim that “Abraham is our father.” John recognized them for what they were, people of privilege . “You brood of vipers! Produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance,” he told them ([Mt 3:8](#)). He did not object to their coming forward; he objected to their lack of concern for real change in society.

In his brief discourse to the Pharisees and Sadducees, John described the action that was taking place: “Even now the ax is laid to the root of the tree ([Mt 3:10](#)).” Every tree that is not fruitful will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

John’s message was about justice, about social change. He challenged the people of Israel to get down to the root causes of problems, to uproot unfruitful trees.

The changes that are called for in Advent are fundamental and far-reaching; they are structural. In this new church year, we are challenged to work for a better society, different from the one we now have.

The uniqueness of the Christian message does not so much consist in the affirmation of the necessity for structural change, as it does in the insistence on the conversion of people which will in turn bring about this change.

Notice that it is not just religious leadership that John challenges. We hear John the Baptist demanding a change of heart from everyone. “Those who have two coats should share with those who have none.” He tells the soldiers of his day not to bully others.

Our second Advent figure, Nelson Mandela, is also one who demanded structural change in his society. While never actually becoming a Christian he, like John the Baptist, preached and demanded the end of Apartheid. But he also demanded that the many tribes in his country, the chiefs and their followers, not continue to fight among themselves but accept each other AND THE AFRICANERS as brothers and sisters.

Mandela demanded a change of heart from everyone in South Africa.

We, in the Catholic Church, are witnessing a third Advent figure. Pope Francis is demanding that we become a mission church, that everything we do is seen through the lens of carrying on the mission of Jesus's mercy to our world. We should not shrivel away within our church walls and structures, but go out of our walls into our world as the early Church did and proclaim the mercy of God to a world that is hurting. Like John the Baptist, Pope Francis has sharp words for his hearers. He says "How can it be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two point."

And he challenges the structures of the church to be servant of God's mercy, whether those structures are the offices in the Vatican or in our local chanceries or our own faith communities. He also

challenges our world to take on gospel values. In his Exhortation, *Joy of the Gospel*, Francis says that “Each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but all of us are asked to obey his call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the “peripheries” in need of the light of the Gospel.

He continues,” I dream of a “missionary option”, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation.

**John the Baptist, Mandela, Pope Francis: three Advent figures
Three people pressing for change in oppressive social structures
Three men calling everyone to a change of heart**

How do we do that?

We might want to follow their example:

Simplicity of life:

- **John the Baptist in the desert**
- **Mandella 27 years in prison**
- **Pope Francis: a man who sets aside the papal palace and fancy cars and robes for the role of a joyful servant**

Silence

- **John the Baptist; the desert**
- **Mandella: attitude in prison**
- **Pope Francis: discerning heart of a Jesuit**