

Homily for the 3rd Sunday of Advent

Winter weather. What can we do? I don't about you, but when winter is here, and it's cold outside, one thing I like to do is play board games. And one that I like a lot is called Balderdash. Have you ever played that game before? Well, the basic gist is that, a word you probably never heard of before is given, and everyone playing has to "invent" a definition of what it means. Then, all the definitions, including the correct one, are collected and read aloud, and the players vote on which they think is correct.

Inventing definitions. In Balderdash we do this when we've never heard of a word before. But sometimes we might also do it when we've heard of a word before – maybe a word we use all the time, but when we try to define it, it's really tough. For example, try defining what "happiness" means. Not what brings you happiness, but what it actually is. Hmm.

Well, when it comes to the word "salvation", I think we as Christians can have a similar difficulty. We hear this word all the time during Advent, our Christmas carols are packed with references to it, and yet when it comes to defining what salvation means, it's kind of hard to do.

So let's look at our Scriptures today – maybe they can give us a little help. In the first reading from the Prophet Isaiah we hear: "Be strong, fear not! Here is your God, he comes with vindication; with divine recompense he comes to **save** you." And in the Responsorial Psalm, we repeated over and over again, "Lord, come and **save** us."

Now, at first glance, these little verses might not seem much help to us in defining what salvation is. But, let's dig a little deeper. In the Old Testament, the Jews would have defined salvation as: "God liberating them **in this life** from their enemies." For example, in the Exodus, when Moses led them out of slavery under the Egyptians into the Promised Land, God **saved** them. So, in one sense, we can say that **to save** is "to set free from one's physical enemies or problems".

But what about the New Testament – What does it say? Well, let's look at the words of the Gospel today from Matthew. There, John the Baptist's disciples ask Jesus the question, "Are you the one who is to come – Are you the Messiah, the one who comes to **save** us?" Now, we could understand this in that Old Testament sense of freeing us from enemies and problems in this world – in the here and now. But, Jesus came for more than this. In fact, for us Christians, we understand the **salvation** that Jesus' brings to be most fundamentally for eternal life. We pray that Jesus will **save** us from sin and death, so that we can be in unending friendship with God in heaven.

So today, when Jesus answers the question as to whether or not He is the Savior, He uses some words from the Prophet Isaiah that are known as 'salvation oracles'. Jesus says, "the blind regain their sight, the lame walk...the deaf hear..." It's almost as if He says, "Yes, John, I have worked miracles to **save** them from their physical problems. But more than this, I have come to **save** them from the worst of all problems – sin – from their spiritual problems that keep them from God."

And, in fact, when we look to Jesus' own life and ministry, we see that He is living proof of both these understandings of salvation. When Jesus healed people, it wasn't just to bring them physical health – just to save them from sickness in this life. More than this, Jesus healed people to reveal what was happening inside of them: He was saving them from the sickness of sin, which is a terminal illness that leads to eternal death, so that they are free to live eternally with God.

And so, when it comes to defining what salvation is, for us Catholics, it means complete unity with God. It's a relationship that begins with Him at our baptism. It's a relationship that is either strengthened or weakened by what we say and do. It's a relationship that is strengthened by the sacraments we receive, and nourished by our life of prayer. And, it's a relationship that will only reach perfection and fulfillment in heaven.

To close, I'd like to draw a final analogy. Salvation is kind of like being at the Sistine Chapel. And if you've ever been there before, you know what I mean. To get to see the Sistine Chapel, you have to pass through the entire Vatican Museum – a series of twisty and turny hallways all decorated with artwork – very beautiful, but it's a long, long, long maze, and all you want to do is get to the end. Similarly, when it comes to salvation, we've already entered the Museum, we are now walking through the halls, and we're looking forward to the beautiful view at the end. **AND IT'S WORTH IT.** So as Advent continues, we joyfully look forward to Christmas, when we give thanks to Jesus for coming to **save** us, and we also look forward to His second coming, when He will bring that **salvation** to fulfillment. God bless you.