

Third Sunday of Advent

Nelson Mandela was arrested in 1962 after secretly traveling around Africa and England to gain support for an armed struggle against a racist government in South Africa. He was charged with leaving the country illegally and inciting workers to strike, and then more seriously with sabotage. Facing a possible death penalty he spoke these words: "I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die." He was sentenced to life in prison. The United States considered him a terrorist. Even though he was in prison, his cause advanced, and he gained his freedom nearly 26 years after his arrest. He won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993 and became the first democratically-elected President of South Africa the following year. He got married for the third time at the age of 80. He never fought racism with racism. When he died last week, he was remembered as a man who achieved reconciliation.

John the Baptist also spent time in prison, but he never got out alive. It seems he also became disillusioned about his cause. He sent a couple of his disciples back to Jesus with the message, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?" Jesus sent back a report of the work he was achieving: "the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news proclaimed to them." John could then figure out who Jesus was.

People were still trying to figure out who John was. He was something of a celebrity. He could have become *Time* magazine's Person of the Year. Lots of people went out of their way to hear him, even to the desert, an uncomfortable place to hear a speech. But they went. And they still wondered about John. Jesus said in effect, "What were you expecting to see out there? Grass? A nice wardrobe?" No, they went to hear a prophet, and that prophet was challenging them.

This was true of Mandela as well. All nations acclaimed him as the kind of leader people could admire and encourage their children to emulate. But Mandela's message was not easy: Let go of your prejudice. Work for equality. Be reconciled with those who think differently.

On this Gaudete Sunday, we do indeed rejoice that the Lord is coming, a leader hailed by all the nations, but let us be prepared for his message. What are your prejudices about your neighbor? About the people you see at work? Or the people you see at church? Are you ready to make peace with them? If so, then rejoice, for the prince of peace is near.