

Teaching by Actions Third Sunday of Advent/A Gaudete Sunday December 15, 2013
12:15 PM Is 35:1-6a, 10; Jas 5:7-10; **Mt 11:2-11** (There are people all around us who are responding to Christ and truly following his ways.)

When John the Baptist sent messengers to Jesus to ask him whether he was the promised Messiah, he did not give a direct answer. Rather, **he put the burden on them to judge for themselves by evaluating what they saw.** “Tell John what you see: the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear.” **Jesus allows his actions to testify to his identity and his mission.** The same thing is true for us. We may not be able to perform the great works of healing that Jesus did. Nonetheless, infallibly **our actions tell people who we are, what our real identity is.**

The world sits up and notices great and significant players on the world stage whether they are saints or scoundrels. But the world also notices when one’s words and claims do not match one’s actions, and no one will follow someone whose actions do not testify to his or her words or claims or stated beliefs. That is why Jesus told his disciples to follow the teachings of the rabbis who had the chair of Moses, but not to follow their example because their deeds were few. And today no one is going to follow the words of those whose deeds are few. Talk is cheap, but **example remains a powerful teaching tool** and almost the only one left.

This past week the world celebrated the death of **Nelson Mandela**, and he was a man who exemplified this idea of one’s actions teaching. He **taught with his actions.** He was imprisoned by a ruthless government, and yet he extended himself as a mediator to bring peace, justice, and reconciliation to South Africa, the land of apartheid. In fact, his willingness to compromise and negotiate grieved many of his own associates who really wanted retaliation and revenge. Well, Nelson Mandela could have had retaliation and revenge, but he chose not to. **South Africa**, which has not solved all its problems, **has avoided the kind of bloodbath and violence that we see in many other countries of our world. And this is principally due to him.**

Now what were the qualities that allowed Nelson Mandela to make such a difference? Well, first of all, I don’t know what he was like through his whole life, but at the crucial moment when it really mattered **he became willing to suffer injustice to himself for the cause of justice for others.** This is just what Christ did. He was willing to let go of grievances, even though they were substantial and very painful to himself and many others. **He was forgiving and he was reasonable.**

These qualities are not automatically set in the human character. They have to be chosen and strengthened over time. It’s a matter of discipline. It’s like working out or running; you have to keep doing it to get anywhere. **We form our characters in the same sort of way by constant discipline. This requires the freedom that comes from the truth,** which again Jesus pointed out: “The truth will make you free.” Indeed! So Nelson Mandela exemplified this principle. I am not sure about the rest of his life; I don’t know much about it. He may or may not have been a professed Christian, but the point is **in this one regard he followed exactly what Christ taught.** He was a disciple, not an admirer. In this he was like Mohandas

Gandhi, who refused to become a Christian, but who followed Christ and said Christ was his greatest teacher.

There has been no such Nelson Mandela in Iraq or Syria or Iran, and the results have been frightening to the whole world. At any moment the conflicts and violence of those countries could spread worldwide, or at least many people fear. As those who aspire to follow Christ, we have to be very clear about this. **Christ's example and teaching is the only way to peace.** If we imagine that there are other options, we are seriously deluded. The future of the world depends on just such actions as we see embodied in people like Mohandas Gandhi and Nelson Mandela. And the good news is **there are people all around us who are responding, sometimes in very small ways, but are responding to Christ and truly following his ways.** And we must never overlook the importance of small actions that are right actions, that are just actions. **Everything counts in building up the kingdom of God,** the kingdom of Shalom, the kingdom of peace. Although the media tends to avoid talking about nice things that happen or good things that happen—they like to stress the horrors of life—but I can see good people all around going out of their way to help other people, sharing their blessings and opening their hearts.

And so the theme of today's liturgy, *Gaudete*, **rejoice, is something we all can affirm.** It is true life is messy; it will remain messy. Freedom is messy; it will remain messy. But **God is capable of leading us slowly but really beyond all the problems we create, and we are capable of learning,** and many people are learning. So the movement toward the kingdom of God is really taking place ever so slowly, but inexorably. We are growing into a new heaven and a new earth. As disciples of Christ we have a very important role to play in the continuation of this unfolding, but **above all we have to keep hope at the forefront of our awareness.**