

Brothers and Sisters, I have mentioned the famous philosopher and existentialist Soren Kierkegaard a number of times over the years and shared some of his stories. Today I want to share his story about geese, a bird that is often unable to fly because they just get too big to do so. Kierkegaard tells a story of some earth-bound geese stuck in a farmyard who decided to gather together every seventh day. When they gathered, one of the ganders would mount the fence and preach to his fellow geese about their lofty destiny.

I think we can imagine the scene; the pulpit goose would recall the exploits of their fore-geese and praise God for the gift of flight bestowed upon them. The congregation of fowl would flap their wings and jump around with the “goosey” equivalent to an “A-goose Brother”, “Hallegooseya” and “Praise the Great-Goose”. And it was the same thing every week. Predictably of course, after each assembly the geese would break up and waddle to their respective places in the farmyard and tuck into the grain the farmer provided. Then on Monday morning the geese would chat about Sunday’s sermon and discuss what might happen if they took to the skies once again. If they did that of course, they might get lost or even worse, they might get shot.

The reality was that the best thing for them was to linger in the farmyard with its security and predictability. The sermons stirred them up and got them all enthusiastic and that was enough. It was great to hear what they could be and do as long as they didn’t actually have to do it or be it.

Brothers, this not only happens in a fable about fowl, but happens all too frequently in churches and faith communities throughout the world. The people are told simply what they must do. And it was the same back in the day of the main character in our Gospel today, John the Baptist. People were told what to do and how to act; they were well versed in what the system was but not so well versed in rising above the system. When John the Baptist was preaching, rather than being unchallenged like the gander on the fence, the people asked questions of John, about what they should do. This was a people who were not satisfied with just hearing about great deeds, they wanted to know how to go about doing great things.

Of course things were fairly simple back in the Baptist's day. In many ways, you either had or you did not have. It wasn't just about "sharing" for John. At the very least for John it was about challenging; he challenged them to share, even with strangers, to stand against greed and the abuse of power, not to blackmail and extort, and basically he challenged them to be happy with their lot in life. It was more than that though; it was a challenge to change. For the majority of the people listening to his words, the challenge would have been about changes in attitude of spirit and heart rather than just in practice. John effectively challenged people to examine their relationships with others. And their relationship with God.

And that of course is what Advent is all about; it is about examining those same relationships. And you know what brothers, that's scary sometimes. Actually turning our attention to our inner-selves can scare the hell out of us, because we don't always like what we see. When we truly look at ourselves we see that we are, more often than not, about ourselves, and not about the Kingdom; we are like the geese who are satisfied to stay in the farm yard and be fed by the farmer rather than to seek out the higher things that we are called to. Why? Because it is easier. Simple really. Monday to Saturday we can go about our business and do what suits us and then on Sunday we can come together and feel all good about ourselves and talk about flying high but immediately go back into the hanger as it were.

John challenged that, as did Paul. But Paul challenged us in a different way. If Paul was a man of Latin he would have said "*Gaudete in Domino semper*". *Rejoice in the Lord always*". Communally we show our rejoicing symbolically with our rose vestments today. Individually we are called to rejoice by putting aside our fear and anxiety and to make our requests known to God. Even when we find ourselves wanting spiritually or emotionally, Paul tells us that we will still know the Peace of God that surpasses *all* understanding, which leads to rejoicing!

John the Baptist had a reputation as being a hard man, a bit of a misery-guts in some ways. There are not a lot of words ascribed to him that could be interpreted as particularly rejoice-full, yet this 3rd Sunday of Advent is about *rejoicing in hope*. Advent is meant to be a time for joy, not only because we are anticipating the anniversary of the birth of Jesus, but also because God is already in our midst,

sitting next to you, encountering you in every person you meet, in every challenge you face, in every dark corner of your soul. Advent is a time when we are called to remember, as Zephaniah reminds us today, that "The LORD has removed the judgment against us". That in and of itself should give us license to fly with the eagles rather than stay in the barnyard with the geese.

I heard of a priest who once asked a man, "If you had two houses, you would give one to the poor, wouldn't you?" "Yes," said the man to whom the question was directed, "indeed I would." "And if you had two cars," went on the priest, "you would keep one and give the other to the poor?" "Yes, of course," said the man. "And if you had two shirts, you would give one away?" The man hesitated but the priest prodded him. "You would give away a spare house and a spare car, but you hesitate at giving away a spare shirt. What's the problem?" "Well", said the man, "I actually have a spare shirt".

Seriously though, I started with a Kierkegaard story, I want to finish with one of his thoughts;

"What I really need, is to get clear about what I must do, not what I must know, except insofar as knowledge must precede every act. What matters is to find a purpose, to see what it really is that God wills that I shall do; the crucial thing is to find a truth which is truth for me, to find the idea for which I am willing to live and die." Just as John the Baptist did, as St Paul did, and as we are called to do.

It all about the practice Brothers, not about the theory.