

Father O'Connor's Homily for 8 December 2024
Second Sunday of Advent-C

Baruch 5: 1-9
Philippians 1: 4-6, 8-11
Luke 3: 1-6

On this Second Sunday of Advent, we hear the words of the prophet Isaiah, which John the Baptist makes his own in the Gospel: *“Prepare the way of the Lord, and make straight His paths.”*

How can you and I do this during this Advent season?

Yesterday afternoon, forty of our second-graders gathered here in church and celebrated their First Penance, Reconciliation, Confession. They came to *“prepare the way of the Lord and make straight His paths”* sacramentally for the first time.

This weekend we take up the annual collection for the Retirement Fund for Religious. So many elderly religious-order sisters, brothers and priests have had such a profound influence on us. As we assist our retired religious, we help to *“prepare the way of the Lord and make straight His paths.”* You may put your specially-marked envelope in the single collection along with your regular Sunday offering today, or any Sunday in December.

“Prepare the way of the Lord, and make straight His paths.”

With this saying in mind, I would like to tell you a true story about someone who, after a long haul, would become a Capuchin Franciscan priest – but not the kind of priest that he had ever dreamed of or imagined.

He was born Bernard Francis Casey in 1870 near Milwaukee. Everybody called him “Barney” Casey. He was one of many children. He worked as a farmhand, a lumberjack, a brick maker, a prison guard and a streetcar conductor.

One cold and rainy afternoon, as he guided his streetcar around a curve in a rough part of town, he saw a crowd of people on the tracks. He stopped the car and there was a young, drunken sailor standing over a woman that he had assaulted and repeatedly stabbed.

Barney could not get that brutal scene out of his mind. He prayed for the woman, he prayed for the sailor, and then he gradually felt that he needed to pray for the world.

Eventually he quit his job and applied to the diocesan seminary in Milwaukee. But Barney had trouble with his studies so the seminary dismissed him and suggested that he might become a religious-order brother where the academics were not as difficult.

Barney Casey continued his search and finally joined the Capuchin Franciscans in Detroit, Michigan and was given a new religious name: Brother Solanus Casey.

He then re-entered seminary studies. But when it came time for his ordination to the priesthood, the seminary faculty did not recommend him because they did not think he was smart enough.

An elderly priest went to bat for him and Brother Solanus was ordained a priest in 1904 and became Father Solanus Casey – but with a restriction. He was ordained *simplex*, which meant that he was allowed to celebrate Mass, but he was not permitted to preach or to hear confessions because his superiors did not think that he was bright enough.

So for forty-three years Father Solanus Casey was the doorkeeper at Capuchin Franciscan friaries. As a humble, obedient priest, he accepted “the ministry of hospitality” as his calling. And, like John the Baptist in today’s Gospel, he did his part to “*prepare the way of the Lord, and make straight His paths.*”

As time went on, visitors to the friary bypassed the other Capuchins, preferring to see Father Solanus. Because he was attentive to God in his life, Father Solanus was also attentive to people. He was a wonderful listener and was able to share some wise advice. And this humble doorkeeper, to everyone’s surprise, turned out to be a wonder-worker as well.

Father Solanus Casey died in Detroit in 1957 at the age of 86, never having heard a confession or preached a homily in his life. But people from all over had come to him like they came to John the Baptist in the desert, learning from him to “*prepare the way of the Lord, and make straight His paths.*” Father Solanus Casey was beatified on 18 November 2017, and he is now on the road to canonization as a saint of the Church.

Why do I tell you this story today on this Second Sunday of Advent? For the same reason the motto of the Christophers gives us: “Better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.”

Father Solanus Casey’s priestly life did not turn out as he had first dreamed of and imagined. He could have lived those forty-three years as the

doorkeeper-priest in the darkness of resentment and bitterness. But he chose instead to carry the light of warmth and welcome to each visitor.

We live in a world that can be so dark, so cold and so violent. So let the Word of God lodge in your heart. as it was in the heart of John the Baptist. Pray that next prayer you are inclined to pray. Do that next good deed. Have a deep sense of your calling, your vocation. And put yourself and your calling in God's hands.

Be a John the Baptist, or be a simple doorkeeper who offers warmth and welcome to those who approach you. Be a voice of hope, crying out in the deserts of our times: "*Prepare the way of the Lord, and make straight His paths.*" Let your very being and the way you conduct your life announce to those around you that the Lord is indeed very near to us.

And when the twists and turns in our life-journeys take us where we never dreamed of or imagined, "Be not afraid." As long as we are "*preparing the way of the Lord,*" and not our own way, we are on the right path, His path, and the Lord is near to us, every step of the way.

Barney Casey, now Blessed Solanus Casey, pray for us.