AdvI(2022)

**ANNOUNCEMENTS**:

 Wednesday is the feast of St. Andrew. He is regarded as the first Apostle because as a follower of John the Baptist he found and brought his brother Peter to the Lord. For this reason the new Church year begins with the Sunday closest to Andrew's birthday celebrated on November 30th.

 St. Andrew recognized Jesus as the Messiah immediately upon John saying, "Behold the Lamb of God". St. Andrew's faith was on display last week as we heard that he found a young lad who was willing to part with his lunch and enable the feeding of the five thousand, unlike Phillip who thought the situation looked hopeless.

 After the apostles split up to preach the Gospel throughout the world Andrew preached in Byzantium, Istanbul, over the Black Sea area and a lot of what became the Eastern Roman empire. For this reason he has been the Patron saint of several nations: Russia, the Ukraine, and Romania, as well as of numerous cities. He was executed in Patras on the Northern coast of Peloponnesia, the southwestern area of modern day Greece.

 He was bound but not nailed to an "X" shaped cross which has become his symbol. Relics of his are spread all over Europe but primarily in Greece at Patras and Amalfi, Italy, Edinburgh, and Warsaw.

*"Owe no man anything, but to love another"*

 Happy New Year to one and all. Traditional Christians get to celebrate two New Years, the secular one in a month and the Church one today. We have put away our green vestments for 50 days and put on violet.

 Advent comes from Latin. It means "he comes toward". The birth of our Lord is getting closer; he is coming toward us. A large number of Christians do not display a season of Advent. Their trees go up over Thanksgiving and down by the secular New Year's. Thus Christmas day becomes the terminus of their Christmas season. These same brothers and sisters of our do not make use of Lent either. They will commemorate Good Friday and Easter, but that is about it.

 While usually fine folk and often excellent Christians, much is lost if one does not keep Lent or Advent. Lent is the great penitential season of the year as we try to grow closer to our Lord and his Passion in anticipation of the miracle of Easter. Advent traditionally has less of a feel of penitence and more of anticipation, but purging sin is definitely a theme of this season.

 Our Gospel talked of Jesus cleansing the Temple. It provides a nice ending contrast to just hearing of Jesus' triumphal entry as we did on Palm Sunday from Mark. Hearing of "cleaning house" is a wonderful counterweight at this time of year to the sentimentalism around Christmas in our modern world. It is sad that St. John's account of Jesus' cleansing of the Temple doesn't get heard since it tells of his making a whip of cords to urge the eviction, something which counters all the sugary images of our Lord.

 Beyond the Gospel, both our collect and Epistle talk of "casting away the works of darkness". Our collect, as all our Propers for these four Sundays, are ancient, from the Fifth Century. As you will see in upcoming weeks, our Lessons, appropriately, build upon each other.

 St. Paul's Epistle today, from the First Century, was obviously the source for our collect, and the phrase: "casting away the works of darkness". He continued then by exhorting Christians also to "put on the armor of light" and "to walk honestly as in the" daytime. These two long sentences about "the night being far spent"; "casting off the works of darkness", "putting on the armor of light" and "walking honestly as in the day" have had such an impact on the church that they are honored by her. This short passage has been read each day at every monastic office of Lauds outside of Sunday for centuries during Ordinary Time. It is called "the Little chapter".

 It is this very passage that St. Augustine of Hippo, at the time of life when he was anything BUT saintly, that changed his life. It was this passage, as he relates in his book "Confessions" that he picked up and read after he heard an invisible child's voice telling him "to go and read". After this one passage he had his conversion of heart.

 St. Paul starts by telling his listeners that they have one chief duty to each other, and to everyone living in the world: "to love one another". He says that by doing that one very thing a person has fulfilled the Law.

 We might recall the Summary of the Law, approved by our Lord which a rabbi put to him: "to love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength, and thy neighbor as thyself". St. Paul, a very highly educated Pharisee from the great school of Gamamiel, says that loving one another fulfills the **whole** law! If one is able to love ones fellow man, it is because one loves his Creator, God. So yes, one will have fulfilled the Law.

 But loving everybody is a tall order you say! We all have arguments in our families and we fight with our friends. How are we supposed to love those we don't even know, much less those who hate us??

 Now modern society might approve of Paul's exhortation to love everybody. One only has to think of the jingles and slogans that society has put forward to guide people: "make love not war"; and "love the one you're with", and "don't mask your feelings", to name just a few. We have seen the result of people trying the impossible of sexually loving lots of others or trying to be passionate about everyone and everything under the sun.

 But Paul here is not talking about love in the sense that society means the word. To him the word love means: **wanting the best.** We are to want the best for each person and for all people, always. Thus loving each other is a debt we **always** owe and are **always** paying.

 This is still a tall order you might say, but do-able with the "right" **spirit** within us. Well this spirit is helped in this by two things. First, the Church has always taught, that ALL humans, even those who are atheists, know instinctively that certain things are good and certain things are bad. This is called Divine law or natural law. Every human knows intuitively that rape and murder, for example, are wrong. Everyone knows that helping someone who is hurting or crying is **good**.

 Beyond our human nature's natural instincts, our spiritual nature has the benefit and aid of the Holy Spirit once we have been baptized. His presence gives us the inclination to know more than an un-baptized person would in any given situation. And as we strengthen the Spirit within us (through frequent Communion, prayer, fasting, spiritual reading), we become even more aware of what is GOOD for other people, what is BEST for them. We become able to better perceive more and more of what is really needed by a person in any situation, **and** inclined to provide it. These are the fruit of good works, the best fertilizer of all for our soul.

 The Church always has tried to do just that: as a body, and individually, to seek the best for each person. Helping is the best fertilizer of faith. This is why the Salvation Army exists, why so many shelters and hospitals are from a religious denomination, why the Gideon's group exists, and why big parishes--to help people spiritually-- have open doors and offer services every day. Central to such operations is **planning**, as in a military campaign, so those responsible know what resources are at their disposal.

 Any general who did not know how many soldiers he has would have no idea how many rifles or bullets to procure. (He would not stay a general for long either.) Likewise, serious sports teams need to turn in their starting lineups before the game begins. They are not allowed to "surprise" everyone, including officials, at the very last second.

 Similarly, a football coach needs to know every player's availability and talents to plan for winning the next game. Without advanced knowledge he otherwise might send out a 300lb. wide receiver, a 200lb. lineman, and a QB wearing a sling. Needless to say, he would not have much success on the field with such shortcomings and a Bowl game would be a pipe-dream.

 In today's Gospel, our Lord, when he arrived in Bethphage, knew that a horse would be available for him in the opposite town of Bethany. Because he **knew** he was able to ask for it, and able to tell St. Mark, whom scholars believe he sent to fetch it, that "the Lord hath need of it". Amen. +