

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today's Gospel introduces the figure of John the Baptist. John the Baptist came to prepare the way of the Lord, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

As we know, the prophets were God's Old Testament spokespeople. John the Baptist was the last of the Old Testament prophets and the first of the New Testament prophets. He is often called the precursor because he was the prophet who had the privilege of announcing not only the coming of the Messiah but also the arrival of the Messiah, the Christ.

If we read the Old Testament prophets, they often begin their prophecies with "Thus says the Lord," a fancy way of saying, "God told me to tell you this." Although we often think of prophets foretelling the future, their main function was to interpret and critique the present. When they spoke of the future, for the most part, they were speaking about the possible consequences of obeying or not obeying God's commandments. We also know from the Old Testament that the prophets were often persecuted because people did not want to hear what they were saying. John the Baptist, for example, was put to death for criticizing Herod for marrying Herodias, his brother Philip's wife.

As much as things change, they remain the same. When we go to Church, we expect to hear familiar and comforting homilies. The last thing we want is to hear a controversial homily, one that challenges our ways of seeing and believing. Yet, the Greek word for repentance is *metanoia*, which means a complete change of direction in life, which, in turn, presumes a new way of seeing.

In his book *Rediscovering Catholicism*, Matthew Kelly critiques our culture. What he wrote 20+ years ago remains largely true today. According to Matthew Kelly, the three dominant attitudes of our culture are: individualism, hedonism, and minimalism. Whether we agree 100% with his critique, it is worth considering during this season when we are preparing to welcome Christ once again into our lives and hearts.

In a culture of individualism, the first and determining question is, "What's in it for me?" Everything is about individual rights and individual freedom without regard for the common good. The fruits of individualism are greed, selfishness, and exploitation.

The hedonistic motto is, "If it feels good, do it." For the hedonist, pleasure is the supreme good. It leads to laziness, lust, and gluttony. Perhaps worse, it fuels addictions and addictive behaviors. Pleasure, after all, can be intoxicating. As we all know, addictions are rampant in our society.

Finally, the minimalist always asks, "What is the least I can do?" The minimalist always seeks to expend the least effort yet expects to receive a big reward. According to Matthew Kelly, "minimalism is the enemy of excellence and the father of mediocrity."<sup>1</sup>

My brothers and sisters, Matthew Kelly argues that the crisis in the world today is a crisis of ideas because ideas shape our decisions and our actions. To be honest, I am not sure that I agree completely with Matthew's Kelly's assessment of our culture. Clearly, if individualism, hedonism, and minimalism are the dominant attitudes in our culture or, perhaps better, to the extent that they are the dominant attitudes in our culture, they will make it very difficult for Christ to find a straight highway into our lives and our culture this Christmas. If we want to prepare for Christmas, we all need to ask ourselves how prevalent these attitudes are in our culture and, more importantly, how they have affected us.

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<sup>1</sup>Matthew Kelly, *Rediscovering Catholicism: Journeying Toward our Spiritual North Star*, (Cincinnati, Ohio: Beacon Publishing, 2002), p. 19. Matthew Kelly's description of individualism, hedonism, and minimalism is found in Chapter 2, pages 15-21.