

**III, Advent, A, 2007**  
**St. Raphael, Springdale, AR**

One of my favorite movies is "Shawshank Redemption," with Tim Robbins and Morgan Freeman. It's about a banker, named Andy DuFresne, who is falsely convicted for murder and spends 20 years in a maximum security prison. Even though no one in the prison knows it, he is slowly and surreptitiously planning the perfect escape. And so, one night he crawls into a 500 yard-long tunnel he has dug and emerges at the other end a free man. The last scene of the movie is where Morgan Freeman, who plays Ellis Redding, finally finds Andy on a beautiful stretch of beach in Zehuatanejo, Mexico, which, incidentally, I visited while studying Spanish in Mexico. By the way, keep the name Zehuatanejo in mind, because if one of these Sundays I just don't show up for Mass, you'll know where to start looking for me, after I plan my escape!

Now what's really impressive about the movie is not the escape, but rather what Andy does while he's still in prison: he does small favors to give hope to the other prisoners so they don't despair. One day, he helps a guard with his taxes and in return gets his friends 3 cold beers each. Drinking those beers makes them feel like free men again. On another occasion he gets a donation for the prison library, and plays, over the prison loud speaker, the opera "The Marriage of Figaro" by Mozart. (I would

probably have played "Jail House Rock" by Elvis, but that's just me.) Again, the few minutes that they listened to those soaring sopranos, the prisoners were lifted out of the prison walls to breathe the free air. And shortly before his escape, Andy gives Red a harmonica; it's a small thing, but it was a great symbol of hope, of a life and a world that still existed outside the prison. You see, the movie is about a lot more than a prison break; it's about a man who never lost hope and who gave hope to others.

In the gospel today, we see Jesus giving hope to someone who is also incarcerated unjustly, St. John the Baptist. And, you know, John must have begun to lose hope by this time because he was sent to announce the coming of the Messiah, and there was no sign of Him. Maybe John had failed. So, John sends his followers to ask if Jesus might be the Messiah. And Jesus replies: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them." Jesus gives John hope – oh, not by sending 3 bottles of beer and a harmonica! – but by assuring him that the Messiah had come. You see, Jesus didn't have to send John *signs* of hope because Jesus is the fulfillment of all our hope. When you have Jesus, you don't hope for anything else.

This past week I saw a perfect example of what it means to give hope in this Advent and Christmas season. Msgr. Hebert wrote in his weekly article in the Arkansas Catholic the following: "This year I received an appeal from Food for the Poor, which showed pictures of various farm animals that could be given to poor families for their sustenance in honor or memory of another person...I smiled as I realized that the picture of three little pigs that I could give to a poor family represented the number of children in each of my nephews' families and only one short of those in my niece's family. So, my nephew's and niece's families will each have three pigs donated to a poor family in their honor for Christmas; I will refrain from telling them that the pictures of the pigs reminded me of their families." He continues: "Two ladies in my family will have goats donated for their birthdays; no similarity noticed or implied." Now, those poor families are not in prison, and may not be despairing, nevertheless, such gifts like the 3 little pigs give hope for a brighter future. And when such gifts are motivated by love for Jesus, then each little gift also carries His grace and makes Jesus present in the lives of the poor. When your gift is motivated by Jesus, you fulfill a person's deepest hope.

Folks, we all know people who have lost hope, people who seem on the verge of despair, and need someone to reach out to them. Sometimes, we are those people! The

holidays are an especially tough time for those who have lost a spouse or family member in the past year. If you know someone like that send them a card, make a phone call to tell them you're thinking about them, or have a Mass offered for that deceased person. The parish offices are packed with gifts from the Angel Tree – more this year than ever before – but still no gift for Dc. Chuck (poor man is so starved for affection). Perhaps you could make a donation to Food for the Poor like Msgr. Hebert did and send pigs to a poor family in honor of your family. Maybe you could make a donation to our parish Food Pantry to help feed the poor in our local community. But folks, be sure to send each of those gifts together with a prayer: that Jesus will touch the hearts of the poor, and fill them with hope.

May I share with you a prayer by Cardinal John Henry Newman? He was an Anglican clergyman who became Catholic at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There were moments when he felt despair, confusion and painful loss as he struggled with his conversion. And he wrote this prayer: "God has created me to do Him some definite service: He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission – I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told of it in the next. I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. He has not created me for naught. I shall do good. I shall do His work. I shall be an angel of peace, a

preacher of truth in my own place, while not intending it, if I do but keep His commandments. Therefore, I will trust Him; whatever, wherever I am. I can never be thrown away. If I am in sickness; my sickness may serve Him; in perplexity, y perplexity may serve Him; if I am in sorry, my sorrow may serve Him. He does nothing in vain. He knows what He is about. He may take away my friends; He may throw me among strangers. He may make me feel desolate, make my spirits sink, hide my future from me. Still, he knows what He is about.”

Every Christmas, God comes to tell us what “He is about,” and He brings us hope. This, my friends, is what we should be about, too.

Praised be Jesus Christ!