There is an argument in Christianity that shows up in various guises about what is most important. Put in rather simple terms this argument is between the Christian who focuses on activity and the Christian who focuses on contemplation. Or if you would prefer it in Lutheran terms the argument is between faith and works (well if you want to get really Lutheran you could say zwischen Glauben und Arbeit). Central to this debate is the question of whether we live out our faith in prayer, study and worship or do we live out our life in faith through beneficent actions like feeding the poor, loving the stranger and caring for the widow and orphan? In many ways it is a false distinction but sadly in this season of Christmas the tension shows up and becomes a way for Christians to attack other Christians. And because of this it is worth thinking about for a moment.

Let me explain what I mean. This time of year we start seeing signs with phrases like, “Jesus is the Reason for the Season” or “Keep Christ in Christmas.” Often these messages are accompanied by an advertisement for a church and/or Christmas Eve service. The argument seeming to be that in all of the hustle and bustle of the season we should not lose sight of what is really important and so need to go to church so that we can come and adore him. And I don’t disagree with this sentiment at all; however there seems to be a bit of a backlash by what we might call those in the “works” camp. I recently saw a meme (that’s one of those internet things that the young kids enjoy) which showed an icon of Jesus and Mary and read, “Want to keep ‘Christ” in Christmas?’ Feed the hungry, comfort the afflicted love the outcast, forgive the wrongdoer, inspire the hopeless.” This answered the idea of going to church by saying that “keeping Christ in Christmas” is not about going to church at all but instead has everything to do with works. And certainly feeding the hungry and comforting the afflicted are Christian things to do, but it also must be pointed out that doing them does not necessarily make us Christian – I mean a group of druids could open a food pantry. But since everything these days seems to be binary we need to ask if Christmas is also asking us to pick a side. Is it about the love and adoration of Jesus or is it about serving humanity? But before we answer that question let’s ask Jesus what he thinks about this controversy.

The story we have in today’s Gospel obviously takes place after the birth of Jesus but I assume it was placed here on Advent III to give us clarity about who exactly it is that is coming on Christmas Day. If you remember from last week we had John the Baptist preaching about the coming Messiah saying things like, “His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” Today, however John the Baptist is sitting around in prison and hearing what Jesus was up to and sees little evidence of the chaff being burned with unquenchable fire and so he is confused. In an attempt to clear up this confusion he sends some of his disciples to Jesus to ask if he is really the Messiah or if maybe he got it wrong. To this question Jesus responds in a slightly indirect manner saying, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.” The answer, at first blush, would seem to indicate that Jesus is saying that works are the most important thing. For in affirming that he is the Messiah, Jesus lists a number of things that he has done – he has given sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf and so on. Put in generic terms Jesus explains that he is the Messiah by referencing all of the physical needs he has fixed. And if we just left it as this it would seem that the message to us as Christians is to go and do likewise so that we may be followers of Jesus. However there is another piece to Jesus’ answer that we should not overlook. The last line says, “the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.” This sounds a lot less about physical needs and more about the spiritual bits, after all good news literally means Gospel. But Jesus does not stop there he goes even further by praising those who believe. In our translation it says that the ones who are blessed are the ones who take no offense. However the Greek phrase that is translated as “take no offense” can also be translated as “fall away,” which I think might do a better job of getting at what Jesus is saying. Summing it up Jesus is saying that part of being the Messiah is that he preaches the Gospel, but he adds that those who continue having faith in this message are the ones who are blessed. So it would seem that faith and works or action and belief or whatever it is that we want to call it cannot be separated. Jesus emphasizes both the actions and the beliefs when explaining that he is the Messiah. And this is something that we cannot forget as Christians and something that is worth pondering a bit in this season of Advent. We need to ponder if we are we preparing for Christ in thought word and deed

Certainly it is a good thing for churches and individuals to do things like provide food, clothing and lodging but if we forget about providing the food that endures for eternal life we are not being fully who God calls us to be. We cannot be fully Christian if we do not pay attention to both. And when we think about this balance between faith and works on an individual level my guess is that each of us has a camp in which we feel a little more comfortable. Some of us would enjoy working in a food pantry but would find it draconian to pray for an hour every day, whereas others would be happy if we added six more services a week but would rather not volunteer to help in the community. And just as Anakin Skywalker was supposed to bring balance to the force in this season of Advent we are asked to bring balance to ourselves between these two aspects of the Christian life.

This morning John the Baptist is confused by Jesus, probably because he was looking for a little more judgment in his ministry. But when Jesus gets an opportunity to explain who he is he hits on the two aspects of what we are to be about as his disciples. We are to love one another as he loves us, which means providing for one another’s needs. But we are also to love and worship God. What this means is that we will do some works and we will do some worship. And just as a quick editorial comment, I think when we separate the two we make them harder to achieve, because one strengthens the other. We love and worship God so that we can be strengthened to love and serve each other. Similarly in being served by one another we find ourselves worshiping God and praising him for his wonderful gifts. And so when we talk about keeping Christ in Christmas we should mean all of this. When we work at a food pantry or give some money to charity we are keeping Christ in Christmas but we are also keeping Christ in Christmas when we spend time in contemplation and thanking God for all of the gifts that he has given us. We love because God first loved us. Let us spread that love by loving God and by loving and serving one another this day and forevermore.