Christmas is now only forty-four days away.  And for most of us that means shopping, planning, travel, decorating, parties, and the busiest time of the year. These things are good, but we do not have to forget the true meaning of Christmas:  that the Son of God became a human being in order to bring us into the eternal life and joy of His kingdom.   So it is a blessing that we have the period of Advent, of the Nativity Fast, to prepare to celebrate this unbelievably good and joyful news.

           Our gospel text today reminds us what it means to worship and receive the Christ who is born at Christmas. After hearing the story about good Samaritan, The Savior concluded, “Go and do likewise.”  In other words, anyone who is in need is your neighbor.  Show mercy to anyone who needs your help.  That’s what it means to love your neighbor as yourself.

           It’s one thing if our children or parents or good friends need help, but what about someone whom we don’t particularly like or who is very different from us in religion, race, nationality, politics, lifestyle, or in some other way.  We often looking for excuses. But when we do so, we turn away from the One who was judged, hated, and rejected by the religious leaders of His day, our Lord Jesus Christ.

            For the Fathers of the Church saw the Good Samaritan as image of the Son of God.  Purely out of love, He came to a world that rejected Him. Also like the Samaritan, Christ made no distinction between different types of people.  The Samaritan knew that the Jewish crime victim probably hated him.  But he cared for him nonetheless. Likewise, our Lord was born, lived, died, rose again, and ascended into heaven for the salvation of all humanity.  Of the Jews and Romans who crucified Him, Christ said from the cross, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.

            You see, our faith calls us to prepare for Christmas in different ways.  It’s not just about presents and purchases. It is also about growing in the mercy and compassion of Christ; it is about manifesting the true love for God and neighbor by which participate in the eternal life of the Holy Trinity.  We should use the Nativity Fast, the weeks of Advent, to prepare as fully as we can.

            If you have not done so already, give prayerful attention to how you will devote time, energy, and attention to prayer, fasting, almsgiving, repentance, and reconciliation this Advent. Devote at least a few more minutes a day to prayer and Bible reading.  When you are tempted to speak or act with hatred or judgment toward someone or to fall into despair or fear, say the Jesus Prayer, calling upon the Lord in humility for the calming of your inflamed passions.   Practice some form of fasting or self-denial in order to gain strength in fighting self-centered desires.  When you have the opportunity to help someone in any way, do so.

            Are these small steps?  Of course they are.  They won’t magically change the world into a paradise.  But they will begin to change us by opening our lives bit by bit to the love which is our salvation, the love shown by the Good Samaritan, by our Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ.