

2nd Sunday of Advent - A Cycle

December 5, 2010

INTRODUCTION (Isaiah 11,1-10; Romans 15,4-9; Matthew 3,1-12)

The first reading for all our Sunday readings throughout Advent this year as well as our first reading for all Christmas Masses comes from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. The historical setting for today's first reading goes back 700 years before Christ. It was a time of great distress for Israel. The Assyrians had literally annihilated all of the area north of Jerusalem, an area known as the northern kingdom. It was very likely Jerusalem would be the next victim of the Assyrian army. In spite of all this, we hear in today's reading a message of hope - a promise of great blessings to those who have remained faithful to God. A great leader, filled with the Spirit of God, would usher in these blessings. This leader would come from the royal house of David - that is what Isaiah meant when he identifies this leader as a shoot that would sprout from the stump of Jesse. "Stump" is equivalent to "roots" here. Jesse was the father of King David, as I'm sure you all know.

HOMILY

A teacher asked her Sunday school class: "If I sold my house and my car, and everything I owned, and gave all the money to the poor, would I get into heaven?" The children all answered, "No!" Then she asked, "If I cleaned the church every day, mowed the yard, and kept everything neat and tidy, would I get into heaven?" Again the answer was, "No!" "Well, then," she asked, "what do I need to do to get into heaven?" One of her five-year-old students answered, "You gotta be dead!" (from *Laughter, the Best Medicine*, Reader's Digest, pg 308) (As I hope we all know, the child was correct, but there's a bit more to it than that!)

In Isaiah's time, 700 years before Christ, God's people believed there would be some kind of existence after death in a place called Sheol. In their conception of Sheol, there was nothing but darkness, worms, dust and the only food was clay. It was a place of utter inactivity. There is no work, no thought, no knowledge, no wisdom, no praise of God, and God does not remember those in Sheol. There is neither pain nor joy - it is as empty of life as it can be. This concept was probably inherited from Mesopotamian mythology and is fairly descriptive of what the grave would be like. Apparently the Assyrians and Babylonians didn't have quite as vivid an imagination as the Egyptians when it came to the afterlife. As regards God's people, we have to understand God didn't reveal everything at once. For many centuries before Jesus, the Jews thought of the afterlife as I have described it. Because they believed that God was just and fair, they logically concluded that the reward for a good life, as well as the punishment for an evil life, came to a person in this life, not in the next. Of course, we know it doesn't always work that way. Good people do suffer and evil people sometimes literally get by with murder. That's the problem the whole book of Job is wrestling with - why do good people suffer?

700 years before Christ, Isaiah described in beautiful poetry a world of peace and justice, and he describes it the only way he knew how to describe it. It will be ruled by a king, a shoot from the stump of Jesse, endowed with the gifts of the Spirit of God. Perhaps you noticed in today's

first reading the mention of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit that we learned about in catechism: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude (i.e. strength), knowledge, piety and fear of the Lord. I don't know if we will ever see a world like Isaiah describes. Isaiah's poetic description would require a complete transformation of nature. In light of further revelation given to us since Isaiah's time, and especially in light of what Jesus has revealed to us, it is easy to envision heaven as Isaiah describes it in today's reading. In this sense, Isaiah's message continues to be a message of hope. No matter how bad things may become, God has plans of great happiness for those who faithfully follow the leadership of this ideal king from the root of Jesse.

Advent is a time of hope, but it is also a time of preparation for the blessings for which we hope. This is where John the Baptist comes in. His job was to prepare people for the coming of God's kingdom. If we want to prepare ourselves, we have to listen to John. We can't just take it for granted that getting to heaven is an entitlement any more than the Jews could presume they had it made because they were Jews. John told them, "do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father.'" John said God is looking for good fruits. Several times in Scripture, Jesus clarified what is meant by "good fruits." We can summarize what good fruits means by saying it means loving God above all things and loving our neighbor as ourselves, but there's a lot that's meant by "love."

John the Baptist is no longer with us (Herod Antipas saw to that). The Church now takes up the cry of John during the season of Advent and calls us to "prepare the way of the Lord?" There are lots of preparations that go on during this time of the year, preparations for gatherings with friends and family, preparations for gift giving, preparations for parties, etc. Let's not forget the most important preparation of all, to prepare our heart to receive our Lord and Savior with greater faith and devotion than ever this Christmas. Amen.

3rd Sunday of Advent - A Cycle

December 12, 2010

INTRODUCTION: (Isaiah 35,1-6a.10; James 5,7-10; Matthew 11,2-11)

If you or I could change our world to make it better, what would we do to change it? Today Isaiah describes to God's people (most probably those who were still in exile) what God's plans were to make things better. God would start with the land, turning their desert, arid lands into gardens bursting with vegetation and beauty, comparable to the coastal areas where the land was fertile and there was adequate rainfall, such as Lebanon, Carmel (which is today Haifa) and Sharon. Transforming the land was just a beginning. Those who were weak, sick, blind and lame would be freed of their affliction. It would be a return to the Garden of Eden where God's people would be crowned with everlasting joy. What a beautiful picture of salvation Isaiah presents. As Matthew tells us in today's gospel, God's work of creating a new world begins with Jesus. St. James tells us in the second reading that as we hope for a new world, we must be patient and steadfast in our faith.

HOMILY: A lady who was working as a phone-order representative for a textbook publisher tells this story. One very busy day many customers had been put on hold. When she took one of her waiting calls, she heard an annoyed lady on the line muttering to herself: "Darn, damn, damn, darn, darn!" She smiled and asked: "What may I help you with today?" After a brief silence the caller said: "I'm sorry I got carried away talking to myself here; I guess I was in too much of a hurry. I would like to place an order for some books." The lady taking the order said, "That's hardly the worst thing I heard today. Now, first I need your name." "Oh dear," the caller said, "how embarrassing. My name is Sister Patience." (from *Laughter, the Best Medicine*, Reader's Digest, pg 293).

This little story might help us remember what St. James tells us in today's second reading: "Be patient, brothers and sisters, until the coming of the Lord." In our gospel, John the Baptist is now in prison. Was he becoming impatient because our Lord hadn't rescued him? Didn't Jesus claim, quoting Isaiah, that he had been sent "to proclaim liberty to captives?" (Lk 4,18) One gets the impression from John's preaching that he expected the Kingdom of God to come in a very short time. On the other hand, there's always the possibility he was sending his disciples to Jesus so they would learn about Jesus and the marvelous things he was doing. I'm sure no one could know the motivation John the Baptist had for sending his disciples to Jesus to ask whether he was the one who is to come. Prophets can see things much more clearly than the rest of us can. The main point St. Matthew is making for his readers is that the work of Jesus shows that God's kingdom has begun. The answer of Jesus to John's disciples as to whether he is the expected Messiah sounds as if it comes right out of our first reading from Isaiah: "the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear, etc."

How often have we asked this same question of Jesus as John did: "Are you he who is to come; are you the one who is supposed to save the world? Then, why aren't you doing it? Look at what a mess the world is in, or look at how I am suffering, or how a friend is suffering. Why did that young person have to die so young?" A lot of people have offered an answer as to why there is suffering. Answers range from the atheist who says there is no God to the person who concludes God just doesn't care, to the philosopher who says just get as much pleasure out of this life as you can and be happy with what you get. There are many answers to suffering among great thinkers. The best answer is that Jesus is the savior. Once, when people thought Jesus was talking crazy (like eat my flesh and drink my blood), and they started walking away, Jesus turned to the apostles and asked: "Are you going to leave me too?" Peter answered: "Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God." After I've explored all other options to explain suffering, Jesus is the only answer that makes sense to me. It takes a lot of faith sometimes to keep trusting that God is in the process of bringing about his kingdom of love and justice and peace.

St. James tells us today, "You must be patient. Make your hearts firm, because the coming of the Lord is at hand." A firm faith gives us hope, and hope keeps us from despair; even more it is

a source of joy helping us to trust in the life that is to come, a life "crowned with everlasting joy" as Isaiah says.

Fourth Sunday of Advent - A Cycle

December 19, 2010

INTRODUCTION - (Isaiah 7,10-14; Romans 1,1-7; Matthew 1, 18-24) Conflict in the Middle East is not a new thing. Our first reading takes us back 700 years before Christ. It was as complicated a political situation as it is today. There are four kings you have to keep track of. Tiglath-pileser III was king over the Assyrians. (You won't be quizzed on that name.) The Assyrians were the dominant power in the Middle East. They were an especially cruel and powerful nation whose capital was located in what is today northern Iraq. There was a king of Jerusalem, named Ahaz, who ruled the southern part of the Holy Land, and a king in Samaria who ruled the northern part of the Holy Land. Further north was the king in Damascus. The two northern kings wanted King Ahaz in Jerusalem to join them in an alliance to go to war against the Assyrians. Ahaz refused, so the two northern kings were going to attack Jerusalem, and replace Ahaz with someone who would cooperate with them. Ahaz decided to call on Assyria for protection. This is where our first reading comes in - an extremely important passage in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. Isaiah warned Ahaz not to get involved with Assyria for they were too powerful. He promised, "God would keep the king and Jerusalem safe." The other two kings would soon be destroyed. Ahaz did not have enough faith in God. Isaiah tried to offer Ahaz a sign. Ahaz protested, but Isaiah offered one anyway. For Ahaz the sign would be that he would soon have a son to succeed him as king. He had no offspring at this time for he had sacrificed his only son to the Canaanite God, Moloch. Ahaz' son would be called by the symbolic name Emmanuel for he would be a sign that God was with his people. It is a good possibility that the son Ahaz eventually had was Hezekiah who turned out to be a good leader and a king who was faithful to God. St. Matthew saw in this promise of Isaiah a greater depth of meaning. He saw that Jesus fulfilled this promise perfectly by being born of a virgin and by being a sign to us that God is with us.

HOMILY - A mother tells the story of her five-year-old daughter and three-year-old son watching the Christmas story on TV. As she was preparing dinner she heard her littlest one ask his older sister, "What is a virgin?" The mother said, "As my mind raced to come up with an answer, her five-year-old daughter answered it, 'It's a lady who eats all her vegetables.'" (The Joyful Noiseletter, December, 1999)

One afternoon after hearing the Divine Praises at benediction, a family were leaving church and their little third-grade son asked his parents, "What's a most chaste spouse?" The mother replied: "A chaste spouse is someone's husband or wife who is good and pure and holy. Why do you ask?" "Our prayers in church called St. Joseph Mary's most chaste spouse," he said. Mom asked, "What do you think it means?" A little embarrassed the boy answered, "Well, I

thought it meant that all the girls chased after him, but Mary got him in the end." (The Joyful Noiseletter, December, 1998)

St. Luke's version of the angel's annunciation to Mary is very popular. Our one stained glass window pictures the scene and there are many, many famous paintings of the event. I can't remember ever having seen one picture that depicts today's gospel from St. Matthew of the annunciation to St. Joseph. Luke's annunciation has a much greater poetic beauty, but Matthew's annunciation to Joseph has a message of its own. Matthew's account reveals some of the anxiety Joseph experienced before Jesus was born, and perhaps, as a result Mary had some anxieties as well. We will soon sing: Silent Night, Holy Night, all is calm, all is bright. Even with angels singing and kings arriving, all was not calm or bright. In the Jewish tradition, marriage was a two-step process. First there was a formal exchange of consent before witnesses. The second step was at a later time (usually about a year later) when the groom took the bride to his home. Even before they came to live together, legally they were married. The gospels do not tell us what emotions Mary may have gone through after the visit of the angel. St. Luke stresses the joy she felt in the beautiful hymn, the Magnificat. But she may have experienced some fear too, knowing now she was going to have a child but not by the man she was committed to. Would Joseph accept her? If she were to be judged as sinful according to Deuteronomy (22,20-21), the penalty would be execution by stoning. So many particulars we do not know, but we do know, especially with this story about Joseph, there must have been some anxious moments. I can't imagine that Mary would not have confided in Joseph, but we don't know what Joseph thought about the situation. Saints and theologians and scripture scholars have differed on what might have motivated Joseph to divorce her. He planned on doing it quietly which means he was not going to call for a public trial. Was he afraid that he was not worthy of the honor of being married to Mary and of being the legal father of this holy child she was bearing? Or was he afraid, being a righteous man as Matthew describes him, that he was breaking the law of God by accepting her into his home. All we know is that it must have been a troubling time. But a vision put Joseph at peace and obediently, like Mary did when the angel appeared to her, he did what the angel asked him to do. As in Luke's gospel, the angel that appeared to Joseph affirmed that Mary conceived miraculously through the Holy Spirit and her son would be God with us. This is an important theme in Matthew that in Jesus God is with us. It opens Matthew's gospel and it ends Matthew's gospel when Jesus tells his apostles before his ascension "behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

One other lesson Joseph can teach us. He had an important job to do and it didn't get him much credit or recognition. Is it enough satisfaction just to know we've done our job and we've done it well without anyone praising us for it? If we can say "yes" to that, that's all that's important. When we think of Joseph today, we might think of all the wonderful people in our society and in our lives who, without a lot of fanfare, make good things happen and be grateful for them and grateful to God for giving them to us. I am certainly grateful for all the great and wonderful people who are here at St. Boniface and there are a lot of you. Amen.

Christmas

December 25, 2010

Each year Santa gets more than a million emails. These are a few that made me smile, compliments of Reader's Digest (Dec. 2010/Jan. 2011pg 181). 1) from Christian age 7: "Mommy and daddy say I have not been very good these past few days. How bad can I be before I lose my presents?" 2) from Bri age 7: "I'm sorry for putting all that Ex-lax in your milk last year, but I wasn't sure if you were real. My dad was really mad." 3) from Rosanne age 11: "Do you know Jesus is the real reason for Christmas? I don't want to hurt your feelings, but it's true."

I had time this week to read a number of inspiring stories about Christmas, stories that brought tears to my eyes, stories of unexpected gifts of kindness, children's Christmas pageants, Christmas miracles, finding the perfect Christmas tree, surviving Christmas after the loss of a loved one, funny stories, stories about faith and hope and, of course, love. I have often used one of those stories in my Christmas homily.

This year I feel inspired to focus on what is most central to Christmas and that is Jesus' birth. Four mini themes I want to share with you keep going around in my mind. The first theme is birthdays. When we celebrate them, when we send cards and give gifts, we are saying the person whose birthday we celebrate is important to us. They are a source of joy, and inspiration, a friend, they enrich us in some way. We don't know the exact day on which Jesus was born or even the exact year, although the year most scholars seem to agree on was 6 BC. It doesn't really matter; the important thing is that he was born; he came into this world as a tiny baby, not as a grown person, not as an alien from outer space. Though he was God, he took on our human nature, grew up as we all have to do, learning and helping at home. He prayed, he made friends, he worked for a living, he suffered misunderstanding, rejection, humiliation and death. He spoke to us in our own language and out of our own experience. He came to bring gifts to all who would have them, gifts we call grace, gifts of God's love and life. So on his birthday we offer him our thanks and praise, we gather together with family and friends to celebrate his birth, we send cards to one another rejoicing in his birth and we give gifts to one another following his inspiration of having given so much to us. His birthday is worth celebrating (not in immorality or drunkenness, gluttony, rivalry or jealousy as Paul says - Rom. 13,13) but in love and joy through the Holy Spirit.

The second theme: if we want to experience the real spirit of Christmas, then we have to look into our heart and discover what Jesus means to us: does he give us hope, forgiveness, peace; is his wisdom a guide for us through this life's journey; is he a companion to support us in lonely times, a friend we can thank when we know we've been blest; is he our God who died for us and who desires our obedience and our love. As with those who are our friends, do we feel drawn to make time to be with him. What does Jesus mean to us? That's what Christmas will mean to us. Christ has influenced our world more than any person who has ever been born. Does Jesus influence us in any profound way?

My third theme is about the manger. A manger is a trough or box for food for horses or cattle. St. Luke seems to focus on Jesus lying in a manger. The angel announced this is how the shepherds would identify their savior - he would be lying in a manger. Sometimes when we think about Jesus lying in a manger, we are distracted by the heartlessness of the innkeeper or the poverty of the holy family. Maybe the innkeeper was heartless when Joseph and Mary arrived and maybe the holy family had run out of money. The gospels don't tell us much about their finances. Joseph was a skilled craftsman after all and Herod loved having building projects - which would have provided employment for lots of people. It is likely though that the main issue Luke wants us to pay attention to is the manger. If we were to read this passage like a Jew would, we would be familiar with the beginning of the Book of Isaiah where Isaiah is scolding God's people for turning away from God. Isaiah said: "Sons have I raised and reared, but they have disowned me! An ox knows its owner and a donkey knows the manger of its master." In other words, Isaiah is saying even an animal knows who it belongs to and who will care for it, but God's people did not know. Now, with the shepherds, Luke is pointing out to us that Israel is beginning to find its Lord and when the shepherds found him they went out and shared with others the good news they had been told.

The manger leads to my fourth theme: the Eucharist. Jesus told us he is food for us, he is the bread of life. He could not have been more clear: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world." It takes a big leap of faith to see in the small wafer no longer bread but the living power and presence of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It took a great leap of faith for people to see divinity in Jesus. Christians today readily accept Jesus as divine but the big challenge to faith for us is to believe in the Eucharist. If the Son of God can become human then he can just as easily become our food and drink under the appearance of bread and wine. "Bethlehem" itself is translated as the "house of food." Christ is with us in many ways, through Scripture, through the least of his brothers and sisters, through the Church, but the Eucharist is the most pure and perfect way we connect with him and be nourished by him. If you are looking for him, "this will be a sign for you," you will find him in the spiritual food he gives us. It is a blessing for me to celebrate with you Jesus' birth. I hope that from these thoughts you might take something with you to help you know why you should celebrate today. Amen.