

1st Sunday of Advent

December 2, 2007

INTRODUCTION

The prophet we hear in today's first reading lived over 700 years before Christ. Most probably he had witnessed the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians, fierce warriors who came from what is modern day Iraq. The southern kingdom of Israel, centered in Jerusalem, lived in fear and trembling that the same fate awaited them. In spite of great turmoil, his message is a message of peace, a peace we continue to yearn for. It is a peace, however, that flows only from walking in God's ways.

HOMILY

Most of us remember when people used to wait until after Thanksgiving to get ready for Christmas. Now the stores start preparing right after Halloween or earlier. It's interesting that 1500 years ago people in France started preparing for Christmas on November 11 (the feast of St. Martin). They weren't busy shopping, but they prepared by fasting three days a week. A century later Christians were fasting every day from November 11 until Christmas. This was known as "St. Martin's Lent." The practice spread. As far as we know, this may have been the beginning of Advent. Many still remember, I'm sure, that Advent was a time to do penance or give up things to prepare for Jesus' birth. Often we went to confession during that time to prepare ourselves better spiritually. Our world is so different. The aspect of spiritual preparation has slipped into the background, while we busy ourselves with so many other projects that we "have" to finish by December 25. I wonder if those who are trying to get Christ out of Christmas are winning, because in our world today, if Christ plays any part at all in our preparations for his birth, it is only a minor part.

Now, I don't want to sound like "Bah! Humbug!" Joy at Christ's birth is certainly an appropriate emotion at this time. And trying to act kindly to one another and showing greater appreciation for those we love is always in season. But commercialism and materialism has, in so many instances, caused us to shift our focus away from the spiritual side of what we are celebrating.

The real, spiritual meaning of Christ's birth comes only through prayer and reflection. Fasting, as Christians did centuries ago, probably wouldn't do most of us too much harm. Fasting doesn't always involve food. We could fast from smoking, gambling, entertainment, criticizing, keeping so busy that we seldom have time for prayer. Let's not forget the big picture: Christ came down to us for only one reason, to bring us new life, to lift us up to himself. It would be a shame to miss the opportunity Advent offers us to enrich ourselves spiritually and to open ourselves more fully to God's love.

There is another important reason for us to take Advent seriously: being ready to meet Christ when he comes again to call us from this life to himself. Will we be ready? The second reading

for today and the gospel stress this aspect of Advent. St. Paul said in today's second reading: "it is the hour now to wake from sleep." And Jesus too tells us "Stay Awake!" We never know when that day will come. Since it's impossible to stay awake physically, it is obvious Jesus is talking about staying awake spiritually. Certainly the people Jesus gives as examples in today's gospel about those eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, those working out in the field or grinding corn at the mill were physically awake, but apparently not all were spiritually awake. They were consumed with their everyday activities and were not prepared when God called them. The examples Jesus uses about two people doing something and one suddenly being taken and the other being left have nothing at all to do with a popular notion known as "the rapture." They emphasize the suddenness with which the Lord may come to any one of us.

Our salvation is nearer than when we first believed, St. Paul tells us. When Christmas comes are we going to celebrate God's love in Jesus' birth or are we just going to celebrate that it's all over? What we do the next few weeks will answer that.

2nd Sunday of Advent

December 9, 2007

INTRODUCTION

The prophet Isaiah lived during a very troubling time in Israel. During his lifetime the Assyrians annihilated all of the area north of Jerusalem, known as the northern kingdom. Jerusalem lived in fear and trembling that they would be next. Isaiah was not sparing in his condemnation of those who contributed to all that suffering. He condemned not only the Assyrians, but also the kings of Israel who led the people away from God and he condemned the people who followed their lead. In today's first reading he gives hope to those who have remained faithful to God. He promises them God would send them a leader who would lead his people to justice and peace.

HOMILY

A few years ago in my homily I offered this little prayer for people to reflect on. I would like to repeat it for you to think about as you stand in in line at the Post Office, sorting your cards and juggling your packages: "God, our Father, may everything we do be first-class. Imprint your own loving zip code upon our hearts so that we may never go astray. Provide in your gracious Providence special handling for those of us who are fragile and keep us in one piece. And when our days draw to a close and we are marked 'Return to Sender,' be there to greet us at Heaven's door so that no one there might say 'Unknown at this address.' Amen." Too bad we can't tack this up on the post office wall.

We heard Isaiah's promise of a great leader who would lead God's people to justice and peace, a peace that is almost unbelievable. We believe that person is Jesus the Christ. Our readings

go on to tell us though, if we want to share in that peace we will not do so unless we follow this great leader and king. And so, lest we get too wound up in all the sending and spending, today's gospel, with its message from John the Baptist, tries to make us aware that more is involved in preparing for the coming of Jesus than sending and spending. Three times in today's gospel John uses the word repent or repentance. When we hear that word we often think of some terrible sinner who needs a total makeover spiritually. If we think this message about repentance does not apply to us, we need to hear again what St. Paul told us in today's second reading: "Whatever was written previously was written for our instruction."

In other words the word "repent" is meant for all of us, not just for bad people. The Greek word for repent in its original meaning meant "to change our mind" As time went on it came to mean "to change our mind to be a different person, indeed, a better person." The prophet John the Baptist is telling us if we haven't been as good as we would like us to be, or as we know God would like us to be, then we need to decide to make a change. Our attitude may need to change or our behavior. Or it could be we're not doing anything too bad, but we're not doing anything really good either. The Baptist said "every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down." It's not enough to avoid evil, we have to do good.

It's part of normal conversation around this time to ask "Are you ready for Christmas?" Wouldn't we be surprised if we asked someone that question and they answered: "I still need to do a few things to make myself better spiritually." That kind of an answer would leave us speechless. The media is working overtime telling us how to get ready for Christmas. Let us listen also to John the Baptist, the herald God sent to tell us how He wants us to prepare for His coming. Amen.

Feast of the Immaculate Conception

December 8, 2007

The feast today is about Mary's conception, that from the instant she began to exist on this earth, indeed from her very conception, she was holy, without sin and filled with God's grace. The gospel today can confuse us somewhat because it tells us about Jesus' conception. It was read, however, because of the greeting the angel used in appearing to her: "Hail, full of grace." Our feast celebrates that there was no moment in Mary's life when there was sin, no moment when God's grace did not fill her.

As we listen in on this conversation between Mary and the Angel, we learn both about Mary and about the child she will give birth to. Mary's child would be Son of the Most High and king forever. He will be called "holy, the Son of God."

This is why Mary was "full of grace," so she could give birth to God's own Son, who would be the source of all holiness. We need to know this, not so that we can put Jesus and Mary on a pedestal and admire them from afar. Jesus, the holy one of God came to us so that we too can

become holy. This is what St. Paul tells us in today's second reading: "God chose us in him to be holy and blameless in his sight."

Most of us do not think of our vocation as a call to holiness. We all want to get to heaven, but most of us think of holiness as reserved for other people, like St. Francis or Mother Teresa. Most of us are content to leave holiness for someone else. We just want to get through heaven's doors. But no one will get to heaven unless they are holy, for holiness means being close to God and sharing God's life. And that's what God's grace does for us: it unites us with God and allows us to share in God's life. If we are in God's grace, then, we are holy people.

Two stories we heard today tell us of our vocation to be holy:

The story in our first reading is about Adam and Eve, our first parents, who originally were very close to God and in their union with God, they were very happy. That was the symbol of the Garden of Eden. But they got greedy! They wanted to be equal to God. The evil one knew how to manipulate them and lead them to ignore God's command. As a result they lost all they had.

The second story in the gospel illustrates Mary's constant attitude of being willing to say "yes" to God, an openness that prepared the way for the Son of God to come to us.

When we were baptized we were filled with God's life, we were born again in God's grace. The very same grace that filled Mary at the moment of her conception, filled us when we were baptized. None of us will ever be as holy as Mary was. She got a head start on all of us. But if we follow the example of Mary, always ready to say "yes" to God, that will lead us to holiness and to the joy and peace and love that comes with it.

3rd Sunday of Advent

December 16, 2007

INTRODUCTION: Today we hear Isaiah speaking to a people in distress, promising them liberation. It is a liberation that will provide fertility for the land (which is mostly desert) and will bring healing for our weakness and our ills. The vision of Isaiah goes beyond any historical distress and anticipates the kingdom of God that the Anointed One, the Messiah, a king who would save his people, would establish. The passage prepares us for the gospel when the disciples of John the Baptist ask Jesus whether he is the Messiah who will establish God's kingdom. Jesus points to his miracles as the answer to their question, miracles that describe the wonderful things Isaiah promises. It began with Jesus but it is a kingdom yet to come which we must wait for patiently. St. James tells us.

HOMILY: A man was arrested a couple of weeks before Christmas and brought into court.

When the judge asked the man what he was charged with, he answered “doing my Christmas shopping early.” The judge replied, “that’s not an offense. How early were you doing this shopping?” The man answered, “before the store opened.”

That has nothing to do with the today’s readings, except that today is Gaudete Sunday, so I thought it would be good to start off the homily with a smile.

In our gospel, John the Baptist was in prison. John got in trouble with the king for condemning the king’s immoral life style. While in prison John sent his disciples to Jesus to ask “are you the one who is to come?” In other words, “are you the Messiah, the Savior, the one who is to establish the kingdom of God in our land, or are we still waiting for someone else?” Jesus gave not just a verbal answer but evidence that he was the awaited one. The miracles Jesus worked fit the description of the prophets that he was the one, especially Isaiah whom we heard in today’s first reading.

What was the point of John’s question? John had leapt with joy within his mother Elizabeth when Mary came to visit. John had pointed Jesus out as the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Why now is he asking: “are you he who is to come?”

There are two possible explanations as to why John asked this question. Prisons in those days were terrible places to be. Perhaps John was feeling pretty discouraged, locked up as he was, possibly contemplating his own execution. John could have been asking in effect, “if you are the Messiah and you’ve come to establish God’s kingdom, where is it?” “If you’ve come to ‘proclaim liberty to captives,’ (to quote Isaiah), to set God’s people free, what am I doing here in prison?” Was John discouraged, was he losing faith or hope? We really don’t know.

Some scholars suggest another reason why John may have sent his disciples to ask that question of Jesus: “are you he who is to come?” Possibly John sent his disciples so they would discover for themselves that Jesus was the Messiah. John had already pointed Jesus out to them, but now he wanted to convince them further. It’s a good possibility that was John’s purpose.

At any event, whether John’s faith was getting weak or whether John was trying to inspire faith in his disciples, we all know how our own faith is challenged when we pray and we try to do good and life beats us down. Why do good people suffer? Why do bad people seem to get by with murder? Life so often seems to be unfair.

There’s no one good answer or even a combination of good answers to these questions. St. James gives us one approach to an answer. He tells us we too need to be patient when life seems unfair. God will even things out and those who have been faithful to his word will enjoy happiness beyond our ability to imagine. Patience is especially hard to people in our society today because we have become used to so many conveniences. St. James uses the farmer who has to wait for the harvest as an example of patience. In spite of all the instantaneous conveniences we have in our modern day, there are still things we have to wait for: the birth of a

child, for a child to grow up, develop a talent, get a college degree. Patience takes faith, faith that God is at work creating something wonderful, even when I don't see it happening.

Jesus gave us evidence that the kingdom has arrived. But we need patience to wait for its completion. With each 'Our Father' we pray "thy kingdom come." The kingdom of God is still a beautiful promise like the prophecy we heard from Isaiah. Like John in prison, we must keep believing that Jesus is the answer to that promise. He is more than an answer, he is the guarantee of that promise. Through the eyes of faith, we have this guarantee in the Eucharist we now celebrate. "He who is to come," comes to us now. We don't have to look for any other. In this faith we look forward to being able to celebrate his birth once again with the hope his birth gives us and that is our joy at this time. So as our liturgy on this Gaudete Sunday tells us: "let us rejoice."

Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 23, 2007

INTRODUCTION – We read almost every day about the problems in the Middle East. This is nothing new. Seven hundred thirty years before Christ there were problems too. The dominant power in the Middle East at that time was Assyria, an especially cruel and powerful nation whose capital was located in modern day Iraq, about 250 miles north of Baghdad. The king in Jerusalem at the time, King Ahaz felt threatened, not so much by Assyria, but by two smaller nations that were preparing to attack him. He decided to call on Assyria for help. The prophet Isaiah, the author of our first reading, warned: "Don't do it. It will only cause more problems." He promised: "God would keep the king and Jerusalem safe." Ahaz did not have enough faith that God would do so. Isaiah told the king "Ask for a sign, ask for some proof." But Ahaz, acting very pious, said he would not tempt God by asking for a sign. Isaiah offered one anyway. The sign Isaiah offered was most probably that God would give him a son who would succeed him. At this time he had no offspring for the king had already offered his only son in human sacrifice to Moloch, the pagan god of the Canaanites. God's gift of another son would definitely be a sign that God would not let his lineage die out. 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. But 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 - Both St. Matthew and St. Luke tell us about the unique way in which Jesus was conceived. St. Luke tells us the story in the beautiful gospel of the Annunciation where Mary is the central figure. St. Matthew's gospel, which we just heard, tells the story as it was experienced by Joseph.

Joseph learned that Mary, his wife to be, was going to have a baby and he knew he was not the

father. It might be worth mentioning that in that culture engagement was as much of a commitment as marriage. That's why sometimes in the gospel it says Joseph and Mary were betrothed and sometimes Mary is called Joseph's wife. It's just that couples didn't begin to live together until they were formally married. We do not know whether Mary told Joseph that it was by the power of the Holy Spirit that she conceived. I would like to think she did. And I would like to think that St. Joseph believed her and decided he was unworthy to be associated with such special people as Mary and her son to be – a son who was conceived by the Holy Spirit. Joseph decided to end their relationship. But if there were any questions Joseph might still have had, the angel made it clear to him. He was to take Mary into his home and he would be head of the family. As head of the family, Joseph would give Jesus his name, a Hebrew name meaning "Yahweh saves." The angel makes a point of this when he tells Joseph "you are to name him Jesus because he will save his people from their sins." It is also Joseph who would give Jesus his social status. That status was indicated by the way the angel greeted Joseph as "Joseph, son of David." Jesus would belong to the house of David, a royal family. Other than the claim to be part of the family tree of King David, the descendants of King David had no power or authority or royal perks since the Babylonian exile 600 years before Christ. But the fact that Jesus had this social standing is very important for the people expected the Messiah to come from David's line as God had promised David his kingdom would endure forever.

On this fourth Sunday of Advent, the Church is reminding us of the exulted dignity of the child whose birth we are about to celebrate. Humanly speaking, he is born into a kingly family. But he is more than human. He was conceived in a unique way, through the Holy Spirit, thus he is Son of God. Truly he is Emmanuel, God with us. He is our God who has come to save us as the name Jesus tells us. No wonder we celebrate.

Let us reflect for a moment on the name Emmanuel. St. Matthew tells us here, in the beginning of his gospel, that Jesus' birth, in the fullest sense of the word, is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah. Jesus is God with us. If we go to the very end of St. Matthew's gospel, in the very last verse, as Jesus was ascending into heaven, he told his disciples: "Behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age." Jesus is God with us, a theme that begins and ends and runs all through Matthew's gospel.

With all the evil and suffering in our world, it is a mystery why God would want to be with us. Of course, we know from everyday experience we want to be with those we love, so if that's why God wants to be with us, and the gospels tell us that is why, then we ask why God would love us so? We have a hard time believing that God does love us at times, especially when we don't love ourselves very much or when we have to face serious problems or tragedy. At those times we are tempted to feel as if he forgot us. Our only response to times of doubt is to choose to believe him when he tells us: "I am with you always." There's no easy way around the fact that we need to have lots of faith sometimes. There's no easy way to have faith except to take time to pray.

One preeminent sign of his presence with us is the Eucharist. Here too we must choose to believe his words at the Last Supper were true when he said: "This is my body; this is my

blood.” May our celebration of Christmas truly be a celebration of our belief in Emmanuel, “God is with us.” And may it lead us to a greater appreciation of the Eucharist we celebrate each week.

Christmas

December 25, 2007

A tune to shop by: Angels we have heard on high; sing so sweetly while we buy. Demons, too, who lobby hard; for maxing out our credit card.

Christmas is a time when kids tell Santa what they want and adults pay for it. Deficits are when adults tell the government what they want and their kids pay for it.

Christmas – we’ve heard the story many times, yet it continues to touch our hearts. For children though it is especially moving because they are beginning to get a sense of what it’s all about for the very first time. We can look at the statues and let our imagination make it all real for us, the joy at the birth of a child, a very special child, the proclamation of this birth from the angels to the shepherds, the poverty of having to be born in a place where animals were kept and having only a bed of straw to lay on, the love of Joseph and Mary for each other and for this child who came to them and to us as a gift from God.

This year I came across a lengthy poem by Ogden Nash called *The Christmas That Almost Wasn't*. He begins his story telling us about a peaceful kingdom ruled by a wise and gentle king. But he had a nephew who was an evil man. His name just happened to be Evilard. Evilard was an unhappy person and he hated anyone who was happy. Most of all he hated Christmas. One day he gathered some other people just as miserable as he was and he was able to capture the king while the king was taking his nap and he locked the king in the dungeon. Evilard and his gang took over the kingdom and worked to make everyone miserable. One of the first things he did was declare: “There shall be no more Christmas.” Evilard decreed: “The man who cries, ‘Good Christmas Day!’ shall have his gizzard cut away; whoever trims a Christmas tree suspended by the thumbs shall be, and he who sings a jolly carol shall be rolled on spikes inside a barrel...” So spoke the rulers, and grimly smiled thus to destroy one tiny Child, the Christ Child and His Christmas. All the citizens were so upset they couldn’t function. Even nature was disturbed. I liked the way Ogden Nash described it: “No one knew when to work, nor yet when to play. For the sun shone by night and the moon shone by day! The mice, they had kittens; the cats, they had puppies; the lions had lambs; and the whales, they had guppies! The ink, it turned white; the mild, it turned black; the pig sang Tweet-tweet, and the cow went Quack-quack. The royal red roses made people to stare, with their flowers in the earth and their roots in the air! The wheat was unground into wheat at the mill, for the river turned round and flowed back up the hill. The spots on the leopard went rolling away and were captured for marbles by urchins at play. Great fires in the towns grew worsen and worsen; flames put out the firemen

instead of vice versa. From headland to mainland, from mainland to isthmus the wide world rebelled 'gainst a world with no Christmas."

I like the way the poems tells us everything in the world was mixed up without Christmas and that's mainly what I want to talk about. Just to complete the poem, however, Christmas was saved by a young shepherd boy with help from St. Wenceslaus. I'm not going to give you the details of how this happened. It would take too long. You'll have to find the book and read it yourself.

The lines of the poem I read tell us the world would be really mixed up if Christ had not been born. We might still be trying to serve hundreds of gods, idols made of gold or silver or wood or stone. We might still be offering people up in human sacrifice to these idols. Would we have ever heard about a loving God, a forgiving God? Would we know that love of God and neighbor are the greatest commandments? Would we have any hope of life after this life, especially risen life? The world would be significantly different, considering over two billion people in the world today believe in Jesus Christ. That's about one third of the world's population. Those who believe in Christ are not perfect. We all sin, we all make mistakes. The peace Christ came to bring us is not here yet. The world is still a better place and we are better people to the extent that we live in his light. Imagine what the world could be if all the different groups of Christians got along with one another and lived Jesus' teachings more seriously. May we continue to live in his grace as we celebrate this great feast of his love. May we look forward to enjoying his love throughout eternity. Amen.