

Advent III – Year A – December 15, 2019

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In Nomine+

Advent is a murky time in the Church year. It is hard to find solid ground on which to stand. By its very nature, Advent is slightly schizophrenic. Following directly on the eschatological themes at the conclusion of the Season after Pentecost, there is a strong focus on the end time and the return of the Christ to judge the world, with its warnings of winnowing forks, axes to the root, all consuming fire and wholesale viper extermination. On the other hand our highly Christianized and over materialized culture pulls us, almost irresistibly toward the more attractive focus on the celebration and remembrance of the historical nativity of the Christ Child in Bethlehem, including the promises of peace on earth, good will toward all humanity, gift giving, family gatherings, feasting and relaxing, etc. How can we feel contrite and repentant with the glorious smell of balsam in the air and Christmas music bombarding us with every step? Where should our focus be? As serious Christians, we are entitled to some occasional sense of confusion and dislocation this time of year, I think.

Today's lections provide a clear example of what I am talking about. We are given, first, a prophesy from Isaiah, one of the classic "proof texts" for Jesus' messiahship, written in the sixth century, **B.C.**! Then, the Letter of James urges patience while we wait for the Lord's return in glory, reminding us again that judgement awaits us all and we're back to the second coming! And, finally, we have our Gospel passage from Matthew citing an incident from Jesus' earthly ministry, 2,000 years ago, with our Lord still very much among us. Then! Now! Yesterday! Tomorrow! Where are we to begin to find an Advent message amidst these diverse temporal and spatial anomalies?

I think we have to begin with John the Baptist's question: "Are you the one to come, or are we to wait for another?" I personally find this an alarming piece of scripture every single time I encounter it. It seems like an impossible question coming from the prophet; who recognized the Christ for who he was while both were still in the womb of their respective mothers; who testified to Jesus' primacy and legitimacy both at his baptism and later when John's own disciples raised concerns about Jesus doing competitive baptisms in the same region. It begs for an answer. But, one is not so easily obtained. Nevertheless, I'm going to try to propose an explanation which I find plausible, at least.

Flavius Josephus, an important historical source for Second Temple history and 1st century Judaism, reports that John the Baptist was imprisoned by Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great in the fortress-palace of Machaerus. Machaerus is located about mid-way down the Dead Sea on the Jordan side. It was originally built by Alexander Jannaeus around 90 B.C. and it served a strategic purpose as a defense against any invasion of the territories "Beyond the Jordan" by powers in Arabia. Herod the Great, who has acquired the reputation of a fanatic builder, greatly enlarged and enhanced it so that it was similar in accommodations and amenities to its counterpart on the opposite shore, Masada. Both palace-fortresses were masterpieces of Roman luxury living made possible by astounding feats of hydro-engineering which produced ample water for sizable garrisons and heated baths from an annual rainfall of barely one inch per year. They were verdant islands of luxury and plenty in a landscape of uninhabitable desolation.

While the Herod's upstairs were feasting and partying, archaeology has determined that prisoners, like John the Baptist, were kept behind bars in the caves that pockmark the entire escarpment, leaving captives more or less completely exposed to temperature and weather conditions, and probably fed no more than would just barely keep them alive. Water, no doubt, was rationed as well. Josephus says that John was imprisoned there for two years before his execution, in conditions that were truly "hell on earth".

By my own dead reckoning, Machaerus is located around 120 miles from where Jesus was doing his ministry, as the crow flies. Information regarding Jesus' activities must have been scant, at best. It's highly unlikely that Jesus' work in far off Galilee was generating much buzz so far away from the centers of power, and even if it were, it is impossible to imagine that it reached to such a remote setting as John's prison. I think it is safe to assume that John was expecting great things from Jesus, maybe even that he would overthrow the Romans and restore Israel's sovereignty, and in his wilder fantasies, might even have hoped that he would prove to be his rescuer. If John's disciples were supplying him with their limited information about Jesus, it certainly wasn't of the root-chopping, fire brand messiah that John had foretold. It was of a gentler, kinder, softer variety than had been for so long anticipated.

Contained, subtly, in John's query is a note of disappointment. From John's limited and probably highly questionable information, Jesus was failing to meet what were the commonly accepted expectations of what a messiah ought to be about, reclaiming Israel's greatness, throwing out the infidels, lavishly rewarding the long suffering faithful. There might even be a hint of impatience over the delay--a not so subtle goading into a more decisive, even aggressive course of action.

To be fair to John, Jesus had to counter these same expectations from the crowds to whom he proclaimed the coming of the Kingdom of God. At various times we are told they wanted to make him king, and even among his own faithful twelve, he had to disabuse their hopes of preferment, ultimately promising them only a cross for their future. The expectations of those to whom he preached provided true obstacles to the message of love and salvation which was his goal and purpose. Their collective expectations distorted and diverted the intended message of reconciliation between God and humanity which was his Good News, and made them unreceptive and at times, even hostile to it!

Jesus recourse to the use of Isaiah's prophetic oracle as his answer is a gentle rebuke to John's inquiries. He presents himself simply as a sign of the fulfillment of ancient, long accepted promises of God's action out of love for his people, and not that of some political leader responding to contemporary situations, no matter how desirable that might be, and he does so in a way that John cannot help but understand. Jesus has a higher, older and deeper calling!

In Jesus' commentary on the ministry of John the Baptist that concludes our Gospel reading, today, we hear an affirmation of the role John played as the fore-runner and last of the Old Testament prophets. He was true to his calling and is to be commended for it. "Among those born of women, there is none greater than John the Baptist. Yet, all those who hear the word of God and keep it, are greater than he."

And it is in these closing words of Jesus that we find the Advent message for today. Whatever our expectations and anticipations may be for the coming of the Christ, whether we choose to bask in the warm glow of the manger, or redouble our efforts to prepare ourselves for the final judgement,

we are comforted and assured of our place in the Kingdom of God. These are merely exercises, intended to enliven and better articulate our faith. We reside with confidence on this side of the great divide, post- versus pre-Incarnational reality. John the Baptist and all his predecessors had only their own hopes and expectations to guide them. On the other hand, in the 2,000 years that have passed, we have observed and embraced the Christ who came to earth; who made himself known to those around him; who died and rose from the dead and ascended to the Father from whence he came; who rules from his throne in heaven; and has promised to be with us always, to the very end. As we await his coming, we live with the knowledge that he has **never really left**.

When we are here, gathered in his name, he is here. That he will come again, one day, we anticipate and await. That his birth is an event to be celebrated and cherished as an annual blessing and universal gift we applaud. But, as to his coming amongst us We need not wait.

He is always and ever, here.

Amen.