

11 December 2005
Advent III, Year B
Isaiah, 65:17-25
1 Thessalonians, 5:12-28
John, 1:6-8,19-28

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the so-called ‘Culture War,’ among the most fiercely fought battles now is to protect Christmas. I confess to be largely ignorant about the discrimination against Christmas in our malls and on television that many Christians are complaining about, according to the paper.¹ With little effort or forethought, I’ve mostly insulated myself from popular culture. It fills me with such melancholy. But it did occur to me that the efforts to stomp out Christmas might, in fact, be a sign of a Christian renewal in our country, a return to our roots. After all, our Puritan forebears, devout and highly committed Christians, the heroes of Thanksgiving, had left merry ol’ England in part because they didn’t want to celebrate Christmas. Colonial New England would not have approved of Christmas celebrations. Perhaps our culture is finding that good ol’ time gospel!²

More seriously, . . . well, a little more seriously, I am all for pushing Christmas out of the public square. It has no place there right now. It’s Advent! The real defeat in our culture and in much of Christianity has been the loss of Advent: a time of preparation and restraint and quiet and calm, instead of indulging and partying and fretting and rushing. Right now, there should be no carols or nativity scenes or Christmas tree decorating. Christians aren’t supposed to be celebrating Christmas now. We’re in the middle of Advent. I want to fight to save Advent. So I surfed by some of the web-sites leading the fight to protect Christmas, and I found not a word about the loss of Advent. What is a faithful Christian to do?

I am not without sympathy for everyone who thinks the world is going to hell in a hand-basket. It’s why I am a Christian. My hope, my trust is not in the world. Our culture has been trivializing Christmas for generations. It pushed Jesus out as the focus of the season long ago and replaced him with Santa Claus. That may have happened even before Coca-Cola gave us our current image of Santa Claus. I heard of a recent poll in which Americans could name more of Santa’s reindeer than of Jesus’ apostles. Why would any of us be surprised? The eight tiny reindeer bring merchandise. They’re about consumption. The apostles say, “Give to the poor.”

Ultimately, I am not convinced one way or the other that insisting upon ‘Merry Christmas Shoppers’ instead of ‘Seasons Greetings Shoppers’ or ‘Happy Holidays Shoppers’ is a vital witness to Christ. And that is really the most important issue. What’s the most effective way for Christians to witness to Christ? Where should we focus our energy to be a powerful witness?

Now, for just a moment, instead of continuing to inveigh against indulgence and excess and self-absorption, I’m going to join them and engage in a little self-congratulations. Last week at coffee hour, a parishioner came up to me and quoted me back at myself – something that can make my heart stop,

¹ The op-ed section of The Washington Post on 10 December 2005 had columns by Colbert I. King (‘Holiday Spirit: From the Heart, not the Mall’) and Ruth Marcus (‘What ‘War on Christmas’?’).

² The Rev. Jerry Falwell has a television show called ‘the Old Time Gospel Hour.’

worrying about what fool thing I've said. The parishioner said to me: "You said, 'Pagans make the best Christians.'" I lightened up and became proud of myself. I rather like that. Despite being imprecise, oxymoronic, and self-flattering, it does succinctly express an important truth.

Christians, obviously, are not pagans, but many Christians have been pagans, or de facto pagans, baptized persons who could care less about Jesus. The point I was clumsily making is that Christians who come from non-Christian or lukewarm religious backgrounds often become among the most highly committed and serious Christians. They've reach a point in their lives and made a conscious, definite decision that Jesus is God with us. If religion has not been a very important part of our lives, and then we have a definite turning point in our lives, a conversion, our commitment is much more likely to be strong and growing.

Some Christian traditions emphasize the need for a fairly dramatic conversion experience, some explicit, startling, often highly emotional experience of God. Some Christians won't baptize a person unless he's had such a conversion experience. This requirement has put off a lot of people, and it makes me highly uncomfortable as well. But there is a wisdom behind it. There has to be a moment in our lives, a decision, when we determine to follow Jesus, that we want to make our lives accountable to him.

If we grow up in the Church, or if we've been regular church-goers for decades, we may begin to take it all for granted and become complacent. We may forget why we are Christians, and it can become a mostly unconsidered habit, a routine part of existence. It can even become a matter primarily motivated by nostalgia or social and political identity. We can stop growing and stop letting God challenge us, and instead we may even use our religious beliefs to justify rather narrow beliefs.

One of the primary ways we keep our spiritual lives alive and flowering is to renew our conversion, to remember routinely why we're Christians. Today, as we welcome new catechumens, this should be a moment of renewal for each of us. We should ask ourselves: "Why did I decide to follow Christ? Have I assumed my Christian responsibility for sharing the faith, for witnessing to Christ?" What's about to happen here is a witness to Christ. People committing themselves to seeking faith have as much to teach us as we to teach them. We need to be learners always. Indeed, at a meeting of many of our parish leaders last week, we agreed that we wanted learning to characterize our parish life. That means we have to be humble - to recognize that we don't know it all, that everyone has gifts and a story, a witness, from which we can learn.

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. John the Baptist came for a testimony, to bear witness to the light. He was not that light, but was sent to bear witness to that light. (John 1:6-8) Last week, in S. Mark's gospel, we heard about a fiery John Baptist warning of judgment, of fire and brimstone, demanding that people repent of their sins. In S. John's gospel, the Baptist's ministry has a different emphasis. He's not preaching judgment. He's coming as a witness. S. John's gospel is full of courtroom trial imagery, and John the Baptist essentially is in the witness box to testify that God's Christ is coming, that Jesus is the Lamb of God.

We are the jury. Each of us has to make a decision about Jesus. John is one witness, but we also have the witness of Jesus' life and ministry; there's scripture; there's the Holy Spirit; there's testimony from other Christians; and, then there's testimony from the world. Like the Baptist, Jesus isn't declaring judgment. Rather, he says, "God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world,

but that the world might be saved through him.” (Jn 3:17) Jesus loves us. He accepts us. He doesn’t judge us, but he does demand that we make a decision. We have to give a verdict, and the verdict is our judgment.

It’s very much like the painting Fr. Conner referred to last week at coffee hour: William Holman Hunt’s *Light of the World*. It’s re-produced on the back of this morning’s service program. Jesus comes and knocks on our door. We spoke about how the door only has one handle, and it’s on the inside. Jesus can’t force open the door. We have to make the decision whether to open to him. And we have to make this decision again, and again, and again in our lives. Jesus is always coming and knocking on our door, asking us to open up to him in new ways.

As in a court, we can not escape judgment of the testimony. The testimony forces choices, and our decisions - and even the futile attempt not to make a decision is a decision - our decisions determine whether God can transform our lives or not. It is a unsettling challenge.

That’s why the comfortable Jewish religious establishment, probably people more like you and me than we’d care to admit, that’s why they went out to the wilderness to interrogate John the Baptist. “Who are you? What are you doing?” The Baptist is out there stirring up religious expectation, calling for spiritual growth and seriousness and renewal. The religious people, the professionals, the long-time Christians, get on his case. “We like to keep God how he is - largely under our control, predictable, conforming to our expectations. We’re comfortable with our relationship with God. We like God making us feel reasonably good about ourselves, but not shaking things up and changing our lives too much.”

The way the Baptist answered his interrogators must have made them even more annoyed. He says what he is not. “I’m not the Christ. I’m not Elijah. I’m not the prophet.” John only says that he is proclaiming someone else, someone far more important than he is. John knows his place. John is humble. He does not pretend to know more than he does, and he does not have any precise answers to their questions - only ambiguities, and we all know how supposedly religious people have a hard time dealing with ambiguity! What John is not ambiguous about is his trust that God is doing something big. John’s faith in God is unambiguous. John trusts God. He knows that God loves his people, that God will act to give us life.

A strong faith is the most powerful witness to Jesus. The way we live can be a voice crying in the wilderness of our world, a voice of witness, a voice that people will hear. In today’s epistle, S. Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to live faithfully. He gives a series of sharp commands, all of them signs of faith. I mention just three of them.

First, Paul says, “Rejoice always!” Now this is from a man who knew all about suffering. He endured more imprisonments and beatings and hardship than any of the persecuted disciples. He had been lashed, flogged, and stoned; he had been left for dead; on many occasions he suffered imprisonment, shipwreck, hunger, exposure; he was the victim of calumny, malice, and back-stabbing. (2 Cor 12:23-28) He knew rejection, failure, and alienation. And yet Paul writes, “I consider the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed.” (Rms 8:18)

Rejoice always! Life can be horrible. It's full of disappointments, treacheries, injustices, miseries, heart-breaks. We don't rejoice in those things themselves, but we rejoice because we know that in Jesus we have hope for the future, we have power and courage to live above and beyond the horrors, we live for something bigger and better than the world. We rejoice because God loves and cares for us in every circumstance. Rejoice always!

Second, "pray without ceasing." This does not mean that we should withdraw from the world and hate the body. This does not mean that we should spend every moment at mass or in meditation. This means living with an awareness of God's presence. In everything we do, be conscious of God, led by his teaching, secure in his love. We work to build strong relationships with other people, honoring God's presence in them, hearing his voice in them. We should expect God to be active in our lives, and through prayer God reveals to us his presence in our lives - often his surprising and challenging presence as well as his comforting and caring presence. Pray without ceasing.

Third, "in everything give thanks." We take for granted too much, and we can become so wrapped up in petty, insignificant matters. Every day we should count our blessings, and we should talk about them, instead of complaining. We overlook the big things as well as the small things. Even on our darkest days, we can find things for which to be grateful. Anyone who has authentic happiness in their life practices and cultivates gratitude. In Christ, even those things we count as curses, the hard and dark things, the difficult people, we can find things for which to be grateful. In everything give thanks.

If we've made a decision and committed ourselves to following Christ, if we accept the testimony of the Baptist, if we are going to be a powerful witness, then this is how we are going to live: Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks. This is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you. These ways of living are what God wants from us, and these are the marks of the good life.

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