

3rd Sunday of Advent – Cycle C

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

Introduction

For the past two weeks we have heard of the Lord's coming as judge of all at the end of time. The Priest wears penitential purple during this season to help us realize our part in turning from God's covenant and participating in acts of darkness (sin), although pink may be worn on this, *Gaudete*, Sunday. There are images of light and darkness interwoven throughout the season's readings. The feeling of penitence comes as we force ourselves to compare our dreams, our great expectations, with reality. What keeps us from fulfillment in this moment? What hinders us from seeking the freedom that God offers us? Our fear of the unknown and our anxiety about taking risks often keeps us enslaved in our old ways and prevents us from reaching out for new ones. Our greed and possessiveness keep us from letting go of what we have so that we can seek the next step in life. God will free us from our enslavement to fear, injustice, poverty, negation, and disease if we simply let go and let Him guide us.

Gaudete Sunday, in the pre-conciliar delineation of the liturgical year, was regarded as a day of particular joy with Advent half over and Christmas soon to follow. The term *Gaudete* refers to the first word of the Introit (Entrance Antiphon) "Rejoice", taken from Philippians 4:4-5.

[This week's readings remind me of Alfred E. Newman, the funny-looking character on the cover of *MAD Magazine*, whose epithet was "What, me worry?" Alfred is cool, calm, without anxiety. The Philippians (our second reading), were they to have an epithet, would have one that reads, "Me worry? You bet!"

Why is it that the Philippians worry but the Alfred E. Newman types don't? The Alfred E. Newmans don't worry because they're detached, aloof, cynical. They don't like to get involved, to invest. To invest means to invest in the success of something – to want to see it work out right. Investment is a sure way to worry; after all, not every project succeeds. It's a simple equation: no investment, no worry.

The Philippian types are the opposite of the Alfred E. Newman types. Philippians are big worriers. They are big worriers because they're big investors – in pension programs, in their children, in life insurance. But, most of all, their biggest investment is in Judaism. As faithful Jews, Philippians are deeply invested in the coming of a Messiah – the one who will free Israel and rule the nations with peace and justice. As Luke describes them in today's Gospel, "The people were full of anticipation, wondering in their hearts whether John might be the Messiah" (Luke 3:15). Philippians are so much on the lookout for a messiah that they almost mistakenly claim a desert hippie like John the Baptist as "The One!" But John keeps

them back: "... there is one to come who is mightier than I. I am not fit to loosen his sandal strap" (Luke 3:16). If this isn't anxiety – holy anxiety – then what is? I think the rest of us could stand a dose of it. For anxiety means that we seriously believe that a day will come when a Promised One will come and usher in God's kingdom. In this case, a little anxiety is a good thing!] {taken from The Liturgical Press Sunday Bulletin for 3rd Sunday of Advent 1994}

1st Reading - Zephaniah 3:14-18a

The theme of the first two weeks is carried on with this week's selection from Zephaniah. "On that day" the people of God will be restored. "The Lord, your God, is in your midst."

14 Shout for joy, O daughter Zion! sing joyfully, O Israel! Be glad and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!

The remainder of this book consists of sayings about the coming day of vindication (verses 8, 11). This is the beginning of these jubilant reminders. The summons to rejoicing has its setting in victory or escape from defeat, as at the raising of a siege.

15 The LORD has removed the judgment against you, he has turned away your enemies; The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst, you have no further misfortune to fear.

Here, Yahweh has intervened on behalf of His people as a defender. In Psalms 46 and 48, Yahweh's presence in the midst of Jerusalem provides defensive rather than offensive help.

16 On that day, it shall be said to Jerusalem: Fear not,

This expression usually accompanies assurance of Yahweh's presence to save in an oracle (see 2 Kings 6:16; 1 Chronicles 22:13).

O Zion, be not discouraged! 17 The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a mighty savior; He will rejoice over you with gladness, and renew you in his love, He will sing joyfully because of you, 18a as one sings at festivals.

Because the people have trusted Yahweh, He is joyful. This is in contrast with the opening verse (v14) where the people are called upon to be joyful. This is a time of great anticipation and the responsorial psalm continues this theme of joy because God is with us.

Responsorial Psalm (based on Isaiah 12)

Cry out with joy and gladness: for among you is the great and Holy One of Israel.

God indeed is my savior; I am confident and unafraid. My strength and my courage is the LORD, and he has been my savior. With joy you will draw water at the fountain of salvation.

Cry out with joy and gladness: for among you is the great and Holy One of Israel.

Give thanks to the LORD, acclaim his name; among the nations make known his deeds, proclaim how exalted is his name.

Cry out with joy and gladness: for among you is the great and Holy One of Israel.

Sing praise to the LORD for his glorious achievement; let this be known throughout all the earth. Shout with exultation, O city of Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel!

Cry out with joy and gladness: for among you is the great and Holy One of Israel.

2nd Reading - Philippians 4:4-7

Last week we heard from the beginning of the letter to the Philippians, today we move to the ending of this letter. Saint Paul concludes his letter with instructions for the people living in expectation of Christ's coming.

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice! ⁵ Your kindness should be known to all. The Lord is near.

This calls to mind the early acclamation *marana tha* (Come, O Lord) (1 Corinthians 16:22; Revelation 22:20).

“This rejoicing is not separable from grief, for indeed it is rather deeply connected with grief. The one who grieves for his own wrongdoing and confesses it is joyful. Alternatively it is possible to grieve for one's own sins but rejoice in Christ. ... On this account he says *Rejoice in the Lord*. For this is nothing if you have received a life worthy of rejoicing. ... He is right to repeat himself. For since the events are naturally grievous, it is through the repetition that he shows that in all cases one should rejoice.” [Saint John Chrysostom (A.D. 398-404), *Homilies on the Epistle to the Philippians*, 15,4,4-7]

⁶ Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. ⁷ Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Either beyond the power of the human mind to grasp or accomplishing more than we can conceive of (see Ephesians 3:20).

“When the peace of God has come upon us we shall understand God. There will be no discord, no disagreement, no quarrelsome arguments, nothing subject to question. This is hardly the case in worldly life. But it shall be so when we have the peace of God, wherein all understanding shall be ours. For peace is the state of being already at rest, already secure.”
[Marius Victorinus (ca. A.D. 355), *Epistle to the Philippians*, 4,7]

Gospel - Luke 3:10-18

The story of John the Baptist is continued from last week. John gives directions to those who come to him and tells them that he is not the Messiah. He points beyond himself to Jesus, who is to come. In this reading we find that it is not the religious leaders who are willing to repent, but the ordinary Jewish people and those who, at best, are on the fringes of Jewish society: tax collectors and soldiers. These are the same people who respond positively to Jesus’ preaching.

10 [T]he crowds asked him, “What then should we do?”

This question is repeated by the tax collectors (v12) and the soldiers (v14). The question occurs twice more in the Gospel (10:25 and 18:18) in which a scribe and ruler respectively ask Jesus for an authoritative response about what they must do to inherit eternal life – and they receive different answers. Three times in the book of Acts this question occurs and in each instance Christian baptism is part of the answer (Acts 2:37; 16:30; 22:10).

11 He said to them in reply, “Whoever has two cloaks should share with the person who has none. And whoever has food should do likewise.”

John doesn’t call for the offering of animal sacrifices or performance of acts such as fasting. He calls for something more radical – a selfless concern for one’s disadvantaged brothers and sisters. John preaches, in advance, what Jesus will preach – the proper use of material possessions. People who share half of their clothing are like Zacchaeus, who gives half of what he possesses to the poor (Luke 19:8).

12 Even tax collectors came to be baptized

Tax collectors were despised by both Jews and Gentiles and it is surprising to see them coming to John for baptism as they were not expected to take ethics seriously. Again and again in Luke normal expectations and deep seated prejudices are turned upside down.

and they said to him, “Teacher, what should we do?” 13 He answered them, “Stop collecting more than what is prescribed.”

The Roman tax system was riddled with abuses, which Caesar Augustus tried to eliminate. The tax collectors had been collecting the tax, plus whatever they could get which was all

profit.

14 Soldiers also asked him, “And what is it that we should do?”

It seems that these soldiers were Jewish men in the service of Herod Antipater. Since they helped to enforce Rome’s will in a subject country, they too were despised. As embodiments of Luke’s themes of reversal of expectations and God’s love for the despised, they present themselves for baptism.

He told them, “Do not practice extortion, do not falsely accuse anyone, and be satisfied with your wages.”¹⁵ Now the people were filled with expectation, and all were asking in their hearts whether John might be the Messiah.

Luke’s comment implies that there were Palestinian Jews who awaited the coming of a messiah; an anointed agent of Yahweh sent for the restoration of Israel and the triumph of God’s power and dominion.

16 John answered them all,

This emphasizes the universalism Jesus’ mission.

saying, “I am baptizing you with water,

John is inferior to Jesus. John uses the purifying agent of water; Jesus will use the superior purifying and refining agents of the Holy Spirit and fire. In Acts 2 Luke shows how the fire of the Holy Spirit accomplishes its work in human beings.

but one mightier than I is coming.

Although the phrase clearly refers to Jesus, its exact meaning is elusive. Jesus is more powerful than John in repulsing the powers of evil.

I am not worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals.

Not even fit to perform the work of a slave. (see also Acts 13:25 for the same theme/text)

He will baptize you with the holy Spirit and fire.¹⁷ His winnowing fan is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Grain was separated from chaff by winnowing – the mixture of wheat and grain hulls (the chaff) was thrown into the air with a “winnowing fan” where the chaff would be blown away leaving the grain which would then be swept into the kitchen over the threshing floor, hence the term “threshold (thresh-hold)” for the bar across the bottom of a doorway. The image here is that of separating the fruitful from the unfruitful.

18 Exhorting them in many other ways, he preached good news to the people.

In the Lucan perspective there are so many similarities between John and Jesus that Luke can say that John preaches the good news as he inaugurates the new time of salvation.

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