

Sunday, December 9, 2018

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Advent (C)

Conventual Mass

John the Forerunner

Ever since I can remember, the gospel we read today, has been for me, **the** proclamation of Advent. “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the desert “(Luke 3:1-2). Perhaps it’s the cadence of the verses, perhaps it’s the voice of the evangelist announcing the astounding news that I hear. Perhaps it’s the placement in time that he underscores. On one level it accurately dates an historical event. It names the

rulers beginning with the Romans, proceeding with the Jewish rulers, and finally recognizing Temple authorities. We know the time and place of John the Baptist by situating him in the context of the major players of his time.<sup>i</sup> And, of course, by situating John, even more importantly, it situates Jesus the Christ, whose forerunner John is, in a particular time and place. Astounding as what I have to tell you, St. Luke is saying, it is not a myth but real and concrete. There are witnesses. The gospel is not only good news, it is shattering news exploding all presuppositions because it reveals the height and depth of the love of God.

On another level this passage is a judgement on the Roman and Jewish political leadership and the religious establishment. The Word of God has bypassed them. Political and religious leaders are

meant to mediate the divine. Earthly thrones mirror the divine; earthly authority shares in divine authority. But the Word of God is not limited to the way we mortals think God should act. It is not confined to palaces and temples. It has searched out a priest's son who is also a prophet and speaks to him in the desert, a place of purification, far from the centers of power.<sup>ii</sup>

This John is not the principal, but the Forerunner, sent to prepare the way for the Anointed One, the One ordained to bring to fruition God's plan for redemption. John is the Advent figure par excellence; he points to, ushers in, the Christ.

John is in a hurry, as is Jesus after him, to make his hearers, to make us, ready for the inbreaking of the kingdom. The kingdom cannot break in on us

without a change of heart, without the doors of our hearts opening wide to receive it. For this all hypocrisy, all falsehood about self must surrender to God.

The repentance for which John the Baptist calls goes beyond a simple confession of wrongdoing. It involves a profound change of the whole person and demands turning our backs on old, self-centered habits. John, in later passages of the gospel, gives some down to earth advice on how to smooth a passageway for Christ coming into our lives, by pointing out obstacles and barriers in our hearts that have to be removed. “Whoever has two tunics should share with the person who has none. And whoever has food should do likewise; Do not practice extortion, do not falsely accuse anyone.” Among the

valleys to be filled in, are the many sins of omission (the good we meant to do but never got around to doing), our neglect perhaps of family members or our neighbor, wasted opportunities for helping others and for witnessing to Christ by the example of our lives. The mountains of our lives need to be leveled out by the daily practice of humility.<sup>iii</sup> These are not necessarily written on a big scale, and usually are not. They are found in the little incidents of everyday life.

John's words may be uncomfortable, challenging us about our behavior, which perhaps we would rather not examine. He tells us that there is a wrong way to live and a right way. If we are to make a clear pathway for God to come into our hearts we have to turn away from sin, large and small, resolve to

conduct ourselves according to God's way and humbly ask Christ for the grace to do so.<sup>iv</sup>

And this conversion is not a matter of a one-time event. It is rather an ongoing process in which we move ever more deeply removing obstacles large and small until we are totally transformed and united with God. It is a life time process and takes perseverance and determination. It is accomplished only by the grace of God whose love ever accompanies us.

Luke did not write his gospel only for his immediate audience. He wrote it also for us. John the Baptist, pointed the way to Christ. He still points the way to Christ but now to us who await Christ's second coming.

The room in which I now live is on the ground floor with a large window facing east. Across the

roadway is a swath of woods. Now the leaves are gone and I can see into and beyond the trees. Much to my delight, I find that when I sit in my chair praying the rosary after Morning Office, I can see the sun rise.

It is a wonderful sight. First the lower part of the sky glows with greys, pinks, yellows and blues. But this is only a forerunner. Then the sun appears above the horizon and quickly makes its ascent. And it is glorious, all brilliant gold, transforming the sky and earth around it. And I am put in mind of the coming of the Lord Jesus in glory, his second coming. Then the fullness of the kingdom will take up our time and place into eternity. Come, Lord Jesus, come!

<sup>i</sup> John Shea, *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers, Year C* ((Collegeville, Minn., Liturgical Press, 2006) 5

<sup>ii</sup> John Shea, 5

<sup>iii</sup> Desmond Knowles, *Voicing a Thought on Sunday* (Dublin, The Columba Press, 1991) 264

<sup>iv</sup> Desmond Knowles, 264x