

Homily for Second and Third Sundays of Advent

(This homily seemed appropriate for both the Second and Third Sundays of Advent. It was given in two different venues)

Introduction

Today we encounter one of the two great figures of Advent, John the Baptist (the other of course is Mary, Jesus' Mother, whom we shall meet further on in this season). All of us surely have a vivid picture of this man, the last of the Israelite prophets. He is brave, outspoken, clear, challenging, very sure of himself, ready and able to speak truth to power.

However, there is another side to John which brings him closer, perhaps, to each of us. We encounter him later in the Gospels in a very different context. He has criticized King Herod for marrying his brother's wife and therefore committing adultery. That gets John into huge trouble; he is jailed by Herod and, as we know, later killed. So we find John in prison, seemingly disconsolate, perhaps even depressed, and wondering if his life has had any meaning. He sends some friends to ask Jesus if he is the Promised One "or should we look for another". John seems to be asking if he has wasted his life as the one called to announce Jesus' arrival.

And the Gospel tells us that Jesus sends back assurances to John that he is indeed the Messiah, that John's life has not been futile and without meaning: "go back and tell John what you have seen and heard" says Jesus, "the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life - and the poor have the good news preached to them". (This last aspect - the poor hearing the good news - is the clincher. The Promised One would definitely preach the good news of salvation to the poor, according to the Jewish religious tradition.)

So John is satisfied and settles in to await the inevitable - his death at the hands of the tyrant, Herod.

I

It is interesting how St. Luke in his Gospel introduces John. As we heard in today's Gospel reading (Luke, Chapter 3), this very precise author of the Lucan tradition (always held to be a physician and therefore educated and scientific) places the appearance of John the Baptist in its exact historical context: in the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pilate was Governor of Judea and Herod the tetrarch of Galilee and Philip, the tetrarch of Iturea and Trachonitis... during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas. This seems not only to locate John, and later Jesus, but also to signal that these were the great names of that day and place - the emperor, the governor, the tetrarch (king), the high priests, but that the word of God came to none of them but to an unknown person, John the Baptist, in an out-of-the-way place far from the centers of power of that time, the desert.

Who today remembers Tiberius Caesar, or Pilate, or Herod, or Phillip, or the others named as the great ones of that time? But the whole world remembers John the Baptist and the word which he

received in the desert has spread to the ends of the earth. So Luke gives us a very interesting juxtaposition of high and mighty personages over against an unknown in his presentation of Jesus' herald, John the Baptist.

II

As I reflected on this Gospel text and its meaning for us, I wondered if we could imagine and hope that 100 or 200 years from now historians might sit down and write the following:

In the first year of the reign of Barack Obama.

When Benedict XVI was the Pope of Rome.

And Paul was the Bishop of Arlington.

And Kane was the Governor of Virginia.

The word of God came to the Catholic communities of the United States.

And they turned away from celebrating Christmas according to the dictates of the culture of that time.

They rejected the escalation of the war in Afghanistan and the continuation of the war in Iraq.

Their young women and men refused to fight any more wars for the Empire.

They lived lightly on the land and led their culture to a reverence for a threatened planet.

They rejected the idolatry of power, prestige, money, sex, enduring health, good looks, fame and exclusivity.

They cared for the elderly, the handicapped, the victims of HIV/AIDS.

And as St. Paul's letter had exhorted them (Philippians 4:4-7) they dismissed all anxiety from their minds, they relied on God for all their needs and knew the peace of God.

And the world was never the same again; the world saw the salvation of God

Conclusion

May it be so!