

2nd Sunday of Advent - B Cycle

December 4, 2011

INTRODUCTION - (Isaiah 40, 1-5.9-11; II Peter 3, 8-14; Mark 1, 1-8) For the history behind today's first reading, we have to go back almost 600 years before Christ (587 years to be precise). We cannot imagine the devastation the Jewish people suffered under the Babylonians. It would have been the annihilation of any other nation, but since the Jews were God's special people, they were not to be exterminated. Their cities, their homes, their farms and the great temple built by Solomon almost 400 years earlier were all destroyed. Most of the Jews that weren't killed were taken as captives and slaves to Babylon, almost a 1000-mile trip, on foot, through modern day Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. They slowly realized, through the words of the prophets, how they had abandoned their God and how that set the stage for this great disaster. But God promised not to abandon them; he assured them, through the prophets, that he would restore them to their homes and their lands. Roughly fifty years later the kingdom of the Babylonians was conquered and destroyed by the Persians (people who lived in Iran). The king of Persia, Cyrus, immediately gave the Jews permission to return to their land. Today's reading from Isaiah begins a large 16-chapter section of Isaiah known as the "Book of Consolation." The prophet is instructed by God to bring this good news to God's people. The route by which the Lord would lead his people home is referred to as "the way of the Lord." Attention must be given to preparing the way. This is the important theme in today's liturgy. John the Baptist takes up this theme five centuries later when he calls the people of his own day to prepare for the Messiah. The liturgy uses today's Scriptures to call us to prepare not only for Christmas but also for the various ways in which Christ comes to us in our daily lives as well as for the day when Christ will call us into his eternal kingdom.

HOMILY: Almost everything in life that is of any great importance requires preparation beforehand: getting an education, getting married, getting a job, moving, having a family (although sometimes the family accidentally turns out to be bigger than a person had planned on). When the pope or heads of state go to visit a place, preparations are made, often far in advance.

When God was about to send his only Son to earth to teach us and guide us into God's kingdom of unending peace and joy, he sent someone to prepare for that coming. St. Mark, as he begins his gospel, gets right to that point by telling us about John the Baptist. Actually, through the words of the prophets, God prepared for his Son's coming long before starting with Moses (Acts 3,22) and King David (Acts 2,25). He prepared for his Son's coming by preserving Jesus' mother from all sin, even original sin, which is the feast we celebrate this Thursday in the feast of the Immaculate Conception.

John the Baptist told God's people, and he tells us through the gospel, that even though God made many preparations beforehand for the coming of Jesus, we must prepare also. John called people to repent of their sins and change their ways if they were not living as God wanted. His baptism was a symbol of their starting a new way of life. John himself, although a

holy man, adopted the lifestyle of the great prophet Elijah and his garments reflected his call to do penance. Many people thought maybe he was the Messiah, but John knew his role; he was only a voice calling people to prepare for One so much greater than he was that he was not worthy even to kneel down before him and untie his shoes.

We get very busy this time of the year preparing for Christmas and that's all very nice, but for many of us perhaps what we need to do to prepare is to become less busy and take time to reflect on what Christ's birth is all about. Last week I recommended that a very good way to prepare would be to read the gospel for the day, picture it, think about it for several minutes. Sometimes we can experience the Lord speaking to us in a powerful way through his Word. Or we could say the rosary during the week, or come to morning Mass or Holy Hour, or do some spiritual reading. There are hundreds of things we can do for other people too, but sometimes we need to take time to do something for ourselves in such a way that we are fed spiritually. As I said, perhaps we need to do less rather than more so we can use our time more efficiently. There's no substitute for quiet time. Taking quiet time for ourselves helps us to remain peaceful during such a busy time and helps us to keep our priorities in order. Don't just prepare for Christmas, prepare for Christ. Amen.

Feast of the Immaculate Conception - A Cycle

December 8, 2011

(Genesis 3,9-15.20; Ephesians 1,3-6.11-12; Luke 1,26-38)

Today's feast of the Immaculate Conception begins with a story about our first parents. They had been blessed with every blessing God could give them. That is what the Garden of Eden represents. However, our first parents were not satisfied with what God gave them. They wanted to be as powerful as God who gave them everything they had, they didn't want to have to obey God or depend on God. They wanted to be equal to God. One thing that really bothered them was God told them they could not eat the fruit of a particular tree in the Garden; if they did they would die. That is a symbol too. It represents some very serious command God had given them. The story tells us about a tempter who came to them in the form of a snake. The tempter told them if they ate the forbidden fruit they would be like God. So they did. Right away they knew they had done wrong. They began to feel shame and guilt. Then they began to try to blame someone else for what they had done. Since there wasn't anyone else around whom they could blame, Adam blamed his wife and his wife blamed the serpent. God told them they had been warned and now they and the children they would have were going to lose most of the blessings he had given them. They would also struggle with the tempter all their lives (talking to the serpent God said: "From now on you and the woman will be enemies, and your offspring and her offspring will be enemies...") Yet in the end, God spoke a word of hope: the tempter will cause some harm to the children of Adam and Eve ("you the tempter will strike at his heel") but he (the offspring of Adam and Eve) will overcome the forces of evil for "he will crush the

head" of the serpent. We who are the offspring of Adam and Eve continue to struggle against the evil one, and often we give in to the tempter, just as Adam and Eve did.

3rd Sunday of Advent - B Cycle

December 11, 2011

INTRODUCTION: (Isaiah 61, 1-2a. 10-11; I Thessalonians 5, 16-24; John 1, 6-8. 19-28) As the celebration of Christ's birth draws near, the mood of our liturgy becomes more joyful. True, it's still Advent and not yet time for us to sing Christmas carols when we come to Church, we are still in the mode of preparing, waiting, and praying for God to help us open our minds and hearts to the great miracle of his birth. Isaiah, in today's first reading, sees the day when God's kingdom would bring peace and justice to those who suffer. Jesus used these very words of the prophet Isaiah to describe what his ministry would be about as he gave his first homily in St. Luke's gospel. The response to the first reading (aka the Psalm refrain) is almost always from the Book of Psalms, but today it is Mary's hymn of joy, called the Magnificat, which she enthusiastically proclaimed when she visited her cousin Elizabeth after the angel announced she would be the mother of our Savior.

HOMILY: Right after Mass the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick will be offered to those who desire to receive it. I believe there is great power in that sacrament, for as a sacrament, it is Jesus who is doing the anointing. The priest is only the instrument Jesus is using to bless the sick person. I always give it to anyone who requests it and to anyone I visit in the hospital.

Today is Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete means "rejoice." I am going to give you something to rejoice over today. In addition to all the regular meetings and responsibilities I normally have, I am still trying to do therapy for my knee every day, we had a Holy Day this week, and I've had four funerals in the last four days. Now, I'm not feeling sorry for myself or complaining that I'm overworked. I'm saying this because I didn't have sufficient time to prepare much of a homily. So I thought you might rejoice in getting a really short one today. If you feel cheated, don't worry, I'm sure I'll make up for it sometime in the future. One of my friends used to tell me, "when you get up to talk, you should have something to say and not just get up to say something." So when I preach, I do try my best to make it worthwhile. Sometimes I might hit a home run and sometimes I strike out - but it's not for lack of trying. So here's my brief homily: it's about joy since today is Gaudete Sunday.

Don't look too hard for joy in things. For joy, look into your own heart; if you find in your heart such sentiments as gratitude, thoughtfulness and kindness, love, a positive attitude, trust in God and awareness of God's love, then joy should soon be growing there. We can get too absorbed in things at this time of the year and miss the joy that God wants us to have, joy that results from his blessings to us and our responding to him. If you want to reflect a bit more on joy, read today's second reading again. Paul sums it up very well. Amen.

Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 18, 2011

INTRODUCTION: 2 Samuel 7,1-5, 8b-12, 14a,16; Luke 1,26-38

For the past three weeks of Advent we have been hearing Isaiah, John the Baptist, and Jesus tell us to stay awake, to be prepared for Jesus' coming, especially for his coming in the future. The last week before Christmas, our focus is primarily on the events that immediately preceded Jesus' birth. Three weeks ago I said most of our gospels this year are from St. Mark. But Mark's gospel begins with Jesus already an adult, so today we borrow from St. Luke's gospel the beautiful story of the Annunciation to Mary that she will be Jesus' mother. Our first reading today will help us have a greater understanding of the profound meaning in the Angel Gabriel's message to Mary. Our first reading goes back almost 1000 years before Jesus was born to the time of King David. David had recently conquered Jerusalem from the Jebusites, he made it the capital of his kingdom and it was there that he built himself a palace. But the Arc of the Covenant, which was the special sign of God's presence among God's people, was still being kept in a tent. Ever since Moses had constructed it according to God's command, 300 years before David, the Arc of the Covenant had been kept in a tent. David decided it deserved to be treated with greater honor so he told the prophet Nathan he would build a temple for God. The next day Nathan reports that God turned down David's proposal. That's where today's first reading comes in. God said David's son would build the Temple. However, God told David that he would build a house for David; i.e., God would establish David's dynasty so that one of his descendants would always reign as king. Amazingly, even after the northern tribes broke away after Solomon's death, David's kingdom lasted for 400 years in Judea. In 587 BC, when the Babylonians conquered the Jews, it put an end to the Davidic dynasty. But the Jews never forgot God's promise to David: "your house and your kingdom shall endure forever before me; your throne shall stand firm forever." This is an extremely important prophecy. For centuries the Jews expected that someone from David's descendants would rise up and re-establish the kingdom of David and rule once again in a free and independent Israel. In the gospel, we hear the Angel Gabriel announce to Mary that her son would fulfill this prophecy far beyond anyone's expectations. Mary's son would inherit "the throne of David his father, and he would rule over the house of Jacob forever and of his kingdom there would be no end."

HOMILY: When Jesus was born, Herod the Great had been king in Israel for almost 30 years. He would die about three years after Jesus' birth - although he must have thought he would live forever with his cowardly attempt to eliminate the "new born king of the Jews." Herod's father was an Idumean, that is an Edomite. He came from a country southeast of Judah which was forced into conversion to Judaism. Herod's mother was an Arabian princess, so he was half Jewish at best. Herod was half Jewish and half pagan in his religious observance too. Herod's father was a good politician and he trained his son well. Their efforts to gain favor with the Roman Emperor gained for each of them positions of leadership over the Jews. (Remember everyone in the Mediterranean area was under the Roman Emperor at that time). Herod was

not at all popular among the Jews nor did they see him as their king (after all he was not of the House of David). Let us consider another king now, whose crown was made of thorns, not of gold. Central to Jesus' teaching and ministry was God's kingdom, a kingdom that would eliminate suffering, sadness, injustice and even death. Jesus, without touting the fact that he was king and messiah, taught and acted in such manner as to show that he was the way into that kingdom. As Luke begins his gospel he tells us clearly, so we don't have to guess, who Jesus is: "he will inherit the throne of David his father, he will rule over the house of Jacob forever and of his kingdom there will be no end." Even more than a king who will reign forever, he will be Son of God. He will be conceived miraculously by God. Who would not want to listen to such a person and learn from him and follow him?

The Credo we say each week is a theological formulation of what the angel says so beautifully and this might be a good occasion to examine the Creed more closely. The Apostles Creed, one of the earliest of creeds, expresses these truths briefly. The Nicene Creed, written in 325, expresses them at greater length. These truths are spelled out fully because by 325 the Church had to deal with many erroneous beliefs about Jesus. For example, some groups, who believed that everything in the material world was evil, believed Jesus was divine, but not really human (he just looked human); at the other extreme, many thought he was human, but not quite divine. This is why the Church was so precise in its creed as to what we are to believe about Christ. (I want to mention three changes to the creed). First off we say, "I believe." This is still the faith of the Church, but it is the faith each of us individually professes. The expression parallels the Apostles Creed, the profession of faith each of us made at baptism or which someone made for us. A complaint I often hear is about the word "consubstantial." This is a new word for many people. I think it's a good thing to increase our vocabulary. It's not a difficult word to figure out. "Con" means "together" or "with" and "substantial" is related to the word "substance" which means, "what an entity is." So when we say Jesus is "not made" but is "consubstantial with the Father," we are saying we believe Jesus is of the same divine substance, he has the same essential being as the Father. He is like the Father in every way (as he said to Philip at the Last Supper: "he who sees me, sees the Father.") Yet Jesus is not the Father and that gets into the mystery of the Trinity (which we will explain some other time!). The word "consubstantial" is an attempt to describe something so unique: that Jesus is divine just as much as the Father is divine, and so we need a unique word to describe it. "Incarnate" is another word that is unusual for many people. Most of us are familiar with the word "reincarnation," which means living life all over again. Literally it means becoming flesh again because "carnis" means "flesh." We have that word in "carnal," "carnivorous," "carnage" and so on. So when we say "by the Holy Spirit (Jesus) was incarnate of the Virgin Mary," we are saying Jesus took his human nature from Mary, a mystery that came about by the power of the Holy Spirit. From that very instant that he took on human flesh he was God's Son. The Church opposes abortion for a similar reason. We argue that from the moment the spark of life begins in a mother-to-be, that life is human life and is worthy of being treated as a human being. At the very moment Jesus began to exist in Mary, he was divine Son of God as well as being human like us. We celebrate the incarnation of Jesus on March 25 - the feast of the Annunciation. Christmas is the result of Jesus taking on our human nature and of Mary's saying, "may it be done to me according to your word." It is an awesome mystery we believe in and which we are soon to celebrate. Amen.

Christmas

December 25, 2011

Each year in a Catholic grade school in Maryland the school had a Christmas pageant. The sixth grade students starred as the main characters. The key roles went to Joseph and Mary, of course. One particular girl in the school had her heart set on being the Blessed Virgin, but when she reached the sixth grade she was six inches taller than the tallest boy. The teacher in charge of the pageant didn't think it would look good so she broke the bad news to the girl that she couldn't be the Virgin Mary because she would be so much taller than St. Joseph. The girl excelled not only in height but also in wisdom. She told the teacher, "excuse me teacher, but if it didn't matter to Joseph that Mary was going to have a baby which was not his - do you think it mattered to him if she were taller than he was?" She got the role. (adapted from Chicken Soup for the Soul, Christmas Magic, pg 67)

We know from St. Matthew that Joseph did have a problem with marrying Mary and was about to back out of their engagement until an angel revealed to him that it was through the Holy Spirit that Mary was about to become a mother. We celebrate Jesus' birth today, a birth that was remarkable in many ways. The most remarkable part is that the Holy Spirit was so much a part of Jesus' birth. In addition to this most remarkable event, angels announced Jesus' birth beforehand, and angels announced his birth to shepherds after he was born. Not only was his birth remarkable but his public life was too: his powerful preaching, his exorcisms, healings, even raising people from the dead back to life. One of the most remarkable things people are often not aware of is that in a short time (probably about three years) he gathered a following around himself and began a movement that continues to grow. Others who began great spiritual movements worked at it for long periods of time: for example Buddha - 45 years, Mohammed - 22 years, Moses - 40 years (Jesus - 3 years). But the most remarkable things of all is that Jesus himself rose from the dead and sent his Spirit to guide and direct his followers. Other people in history have made claims to being divine, have had a reputation for being great teachers, were holy men and women, some even had miraculous powers. If it had not been for Jesus' resurrection and the power of the Holy Spirit, we would never have heard of Jesus. The Apostles would never have had the courage to spread his message. This remarkable man, Jesus the Messiah (the Christ), a man with little or no earthly power or influence has influenced millions of lives in the past 2000 years. Today we celebrate his birth; we celebrate the gift God gave us when he sent us Jesus. We celebrate with lights for he is the light of the world. We celebrate with music for he came to bring harmony and peace to the world. We celebrate with gifts for he is God's gift sent to us - God's only Son. We can never forget the reason why he was sent. He came down to us in order to lift us up, to make us sharers in God's life and to make us God's true sons and daughters, children of God who will be with God forever. That is what gives us hope in this world, hope in times of sadness and crisis, hope in times of war and chaos. God has great plans for us, greater than any of us are able to imagine. Jesus has come to lead us along the way that will bring us to the eternal happiness for which we were created. Christmas is

more than the celebration of the birth of Jesus. In Christmas we are made aware of our own rebirth into eternal life which came through faith and baptism and which is nourished each week through the Eucharist. In union with this remarkable person, Jesus, who was born and died and has risen and is with us yet, we celebrate God's love and ask that someday we may celebrate that love forever in his kingdom. Amen.