

“A Different Kind of Waiting”

Homily of December 4, 2005

by Fr. Brian Joyce

In a few minutes, or a few hours, depending on the length of my homily, we will be welcoming those who are preparing to join the Catholic community. We will be praying with them, meeting them, and sending them forth to study God’s word. They are scattered among us, cleverly hidden in the congregation at the moment and wondering a lot of questions about becoming Catholic, like “What’s this Advent business all about?” Well, if you pick up the bulletin, you can see on the cover it’s about waiting. But it says, it’s a “different kind of waiting.” What do we mean by a different kind of waiting? Well, it’s not ho-hum, when will it come? It’s not like waiting in a doctor’s office for your appointment. It’s not like waiting on the platform for BART to arrive. And it’s not even like waiting for Christmas. The reason it’s not like waiting for Christmas, what’s to wait for? No surprises. We know the exact date. Secondly, we’ve been there and done that before. And, thirdly, we don’t wait. I noticed the sales began and the decorations went up around Halloween, and in many stores, they will come down Christmas Eve, before Christmas even gets here. So that’s not what it’s about.

There are two ways that Christians for thousands of years have often thought about the waiting as being different. And I want to mention these two ways because personally I don’t agree with them. Or at least I don’t think we understand them right. One is it’s a waiting for the second coming of Jesus, waiting for a dramatic reappearance of Jesus of Nazareth, a personal surprise drop-in visit. And books like the Left-behind series talk about the Rapture and the Final Coming of Jesus. I don’t know if he drives up or flies up. Societies like the Watch Tower try to calculate the exact time for his arrival or for the end of the world, because that’s the second way Christians often think about what we’re waiting for, the end of the world as the sudden demolition of the Planet or maybe even the Universe by fire and judgment.

After about a hundred years of waiting for the second coming of Jesus, the early Christians began to doubt. When will he come? Will he ever come at all? I think we doubt it too. We say things like, “Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again.” But we don’t think much about it. We don’t take it personally. And we don’t take it seriously. That’s why I don’t think that’s the kind of waiting we’re involved in. The apostle Peter, in today’s reading, answered the questions by saying, “Well God’s on a different time table than we are. One day with the Lord is like a thousand years. A thousand years is like one day.” That’s true enough. That’s true enough. He still talks about final demolition by fire.

I’d like to suggest that, unless we do it ourselves with nuclear weapons or with our tendency to

solve our problems with violence and with war, unless we do it ourselves, I don't think the plan of God or the purpose of God or the program of God or the promise of God is to blow us all up. I don't think so. And I don't think Jesus is simply going to arrive by himself all of a sudden.

Here's what my belief is. First, the Christ for whom we are waiting is, in fact, waiting for us because it is in us and it is by us and it is through us that he comes into the present. And it is through our hands and through our hearts that he is made present in this world. That's old fashioned, traditional, mystical Body of Christ theology. You are the Body of Christ, member for member. Or, as the Scripture says, we fill up in our life and suffering what's missing in Christ, whereas the documents of the Second Vatican Council say, "Christ is at work and present through human hands, through human hearts." Nothing surprising. It's really as if Christ says, "I'll be with you. I'll walk with you, but come on. Let's all get to it." We're not waiting for him. He's waiting for us.

I have to say, I preached a similar homily (I can't make up that many in one weekend, you know.) at one of the other Masses. Then I was presiding at the altar and I found every other prayer seemed to be about "he will come again..... he will come again....." Christ's coming. I would suggest when we say that, we say it with determination that we are a part of his coming. He will come again because we, with Christ and with Christ's spirit, we will make it happen. We will make it happen.

Now, the new heaven and the new earth.... Unless we destroy our planet by over-consumption and abuse and violence, God's plan and God's future is a renewed heaven and a radically changed earth. By the power of God's Spirit it will be changed and by the cooperation of God's people. The God who made us without our consent is not going to save us or our world without our consent and our cooperation. So, if Christ is the one waiting for us and if the future is not wholesale demolition of the Planet, but the building of the kingdom, how do we prepare for it? What do we do in the meantime?

Well, I think today's gospel is very helpful because John the Baptist and all those people were living "in the meantime" too. They were living in Palestine, at the time of John the Baptist, in occupied territory. It was occupied by the troops and the armed forces of Rome, and people dealt with it differently. Some just went along and began to assimilate and to accept Roman ways and Roman customs. Others were the rejectionists. They were against accepting this, but they were passive and didn't do anything about it. Others were secretly planning to turn it around. These were the insurgents, terrorists, the Zealots. One of the apostles is called Simon of the Zealot Party, the terrorists. And then there were the majority who were just surviving day by day, not easy, wondering what's going to happen. And, out of the blue, comes John the Baptist, announcing the day of the Lord, the judgment of the Lord and "Your liberation is about to happen if you reform your hearts."

We are challenged the same way. What do we do in the meantime? Well, we remember that we

are living in occupied territory. We are strangers in a culture that is very different from what Christ calls for. And it is indifferent and hostile to the values of Christ. And we are part of it. We are occupied inside and out. Those other values consume us and absorb us and try to make us their own. At least half our hearts, if not our whole hearts, are occupied territory, occupied by possessions, by fears, by consumerism, by greed, by a tendency to anger and revenge and violence. What do we do in the meantime? That's what Advent invites us to think about.

I think what we do in the meantime is we set our hands to the task of reforming our own spirits, and to the challenge of reforming our world. And it will seem subversive at times because we are living in occupied territory that doesn't share our values and we don't share our values a lot of the time. What will it look like? What does it look like? Well, I think it looks like all those people who protest torture of any fellow human being for whatever reason and by whatever government because this is not what we should be about. It looks like those twenty thousand, many from the Bay Area who went to Fort Benning, Georgia, two weeks ago to protest the track record and tactics of the School of the Americas because that's not what we should be about. It looks like the thousands who, in the coming days, will be praying and protesting the death penalty because that's not what we are supposed to be about. It will look like the countless visitors who are spending this week down in El Salvador to memorialize the four martyred churchwomen because that's not what we are supposed to be about. It will look like ourselves, gathering gifts and toys and money and food for the needy during the holidays because that's what we should be about. It will look like the outreach to the victims of hurricane and disaster because that's what we should be about. It will look like quiet efforts at home to mend anger or at least to let go of resentment and move on because that's what we need to be about. It will look like quiet, simple, everyday acts of kindness, gentleness, caring because that's what we need to be about. The key is really in the gospel that I preached about on the feast of Christ the King, Matthew 25. The key is the condition and treatment of the hungry, of the thirsty, of the homeless, of the stranger, of the alienated, of the ill, and of the imprisoned. That's what the test is going to be.

What happened to the fire? I always looked forward to the fire at the end, you know, the big finale, the end-of-the-world demolition derby with all the pyrotechnics! Where did that go? Well, I still think it's a real possibility that we can bring on ourselves if we don't reform our hearts and our ways. But I think our destiny is framed in a different way by one of the great priests, scientists, mystics of the twentieth century who said the following, and I find it hopeful and helpful and fully Christian. "The day will come when, after harnessing space, the winds, the tides and gravitation, we shall harness for God the energies of love. And, on that day, for the second time in the history of the world, we shall have discovered fire." Amen.