

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

DECEMBER 6, 2020

Today the scriptures share various prophetic voices with us. There is Isaiah, the ancient poet who, at times, would comfort Israel and at other times challenge them. There is Peter, or someone later writing in his name, who spoke to his people and to us today about patience, vigilance and trust. And, finally, there is the dynamic figure of John the Baptist calling people to reform their lives.

I began to wonder whether we have and who might be the prophets of our own time. The twentieth century certainly had a number of them. For me Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Desmond Tutu, Pope John XXIII plus others whom you may recall were prophetic voices for us.

Who are the prophets of today? Would you include Anthony Fauci who has spoken words of truth to power? Who else might you include?

Let's get back to the prophets of the scriptures. Today's reading from Isaiah begins with the beautiful message, "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God." These words may sound familiar to many of us. They are the opening words of Handel's oratorio, "The Messiah" which I am listening to as I write.

Comfort ye, comfort ye.... Do you hear God speaking to us today in the midst of a pandemic that promises to get worse?

The passage from Isaiah ends with these words, "God will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently heal the mother sheep". These tender words have made some commentators believe that this part of Isaiah has been written by a woman.

The writer of the second epistle of Peter writes to a second generation of Christians who now wonder what the return of the Christ might mean and when that might come. He counsels patience. "We wait for a new heaven and a new earth.... Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him in peace... and regard the patience of the Lord as salvation." As this pandemic and the seclusion and separation it has brought upon us drags on and we find ourselves in a kind of desert space from the experiences of isolation, fear and grief, can we see that God is being patient with us as we learn to be patient with ourselves?

Turning to the beginning of Mark's gospel, how can we avoid John's challenge to prepare for Christ's coming by a conversion, by repentance, by a change of our lives, our values, and lifestyle?

We can't go on as we were with the injustices of our society that were only getting deeper and worse. Income inequality, racism, poor and neglected children, a high mortality rate of infants, lack of health care, nuclear stockpiling. John is preparing us to hear and heed Christ's vision of the kingdom of God by turning from indifference and selfishness. He tells us there is a new way out of emptiness and misery.

Yes, the prophets of old still speak to us. But I return to whom we might listen to today? I suggest Pope Francis is a true prophetic voice. Conservatives may dismiss him because they believe he is changing doctrine. Liberals dismiss him because he is too slow in making the structural changes they believe in.

Pope Francis has challenged us to look to the peripheries to see the poor, the immigrants, the people most in need. He has been turning the universal church into a church of the peripheries. Those satisfied with the status quo and the glory of mother church are kicking and screaming.

But the Pope has also laid out a vision. He is speaking out to the church and the world on how to build the kingdom of God today. Pope Francis has authored three major documents, all three about our relationships. The first document, *Evangelii gaudium*, *The Joy of the Gospel*, is about our relationship to God. The second document, the encyclical, *Laudato Si*, issued five years ago, is about our relationship to creation. The most recent encyclical, *Fratelli Si*, is about our relationship to all our human brothers and sisters. All three relationships need to be in harmony or we are out of sync with reality. Our secularized culture cannot be expected to accept the harmony of all three. So we believers need to live counter-cultural lives, not to enforce our views on society, but to bring a wholistic vision to the mix of all of us.

We should all be acquainted with the Pope's vision and it is worthwhile to study these documents. But there is a more recent, shorter document, "Let us Dream," written specifically to a world in the darkness of the pandemic. It was published on December 1st and written with the help of an English journalist. It is written in good, fluent English and is easy to read. In it the Pope shares his personal story of how he came to see that the call to live in friendship with God and our neighbor is inseparably bound with care for our environment. There are moving passages on

beauty, gratitude, harmony, friendship, personal struggle. I encourage you get it for good Advent reading or for a Christmas present. (Available on-line at the Abbey Bookstore).

We are not looking to the future for the coming of Christ. He is present now in the everyday events of life, in the touch of God, in creation, in each other. Advent is a time to open our eyes and see what is before us. We are lamenting what we have lost in these months.

Can we find joy in what we already have? Can we open our eyes to see God at work in the world and in our lives? This then is the mission of the prophets for us.

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