

Sermon

'The Joy of the Gospel'

Year B, Advent 1, The Beginning of the Church New Year, Mark 13.24-37



In September, our family enjoyed a family holiday in Europe. Arriving in Rome, we were picked up from the airport by our driver. As he drove away, I was struck by the picture of the smiling Pope Francis, that had been pinned above the head of our driver. A daily companion, encouragement, and spiritual guide. Not only to our driver, but to the worldwide Christian church.

In his book, *The Joy of the Gospel*, Francis writes,

‘The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew. I wish to encourage the Christian faithful to embark upon a new chapter of evangelization marked by this joy.’

This morning we have the privilege of baptizing two beautiful children here at Saint Peter’s - Babies Harper and Zoe. And I say privilege because in fact we are witnesses, all of us, to the action of God himself – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – in baptism. To the joy of heaven. As the heavens are opened before us, the Spirit descending upon these little children like a dove, and the voice of our Father in heaven say, ‘These are now my beloved daughters, in whom I am well pleased.’

‘The great danger in today’s world’, Francis goes on, ‘pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet

covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience. Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns...God's voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades. This is a very real danger for believers too. Many fall prey to it, and end up resentful, angry and listless. That is no way to live a dignified and fulfilled life; it is not God's will for us, nor is it the life in the Spirit which has its source in the heart of the risen Christ.'

At the beginning of Advent, the beginning of the new year in the life of our Parish, along with Francis, I now call you:

'at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter you; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day. No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her, since "no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord". The Lord does not disappoint those who take this risk; whenever we take a step towards Jesus, we come to realize that he is already there, waiting for us with open arms. Now is the time to say to Jesus: "Lord, I have let myself be deceived; in a thousand ways I have shunned your love, yet here I am once more, to renew my covenant with you. I need you. Save me once again, Lord, take me once more into your redeeming embrace". How good it feels to come back to him whenever we are lost!'

In this age of consumerism, frivolous pleasure, and blunted conscience, there are many Christians who have simply fallen asleep. Fallen tired.

Says Francis

‘God never tires of forgiving us. We are the ones who tire of seeking his mercy... Time and time again he bears us on his shoulders. No one can strip us of the dignity bestowed upon us by this boundless and unfailing love. With a tenderness which never disappoints, but is always capable of restoring our joy, he makes it possible for us to lift up our heads and to start anew. Let us never give up, come what will. May nothing inspire more than his life, which impels us onwards!’

The word ‘Advent’ means simply the ‘coming’ of Jesus. Our readings this morning actually speak of three comings of Jesus. Three comings, they are, in the end, one coming, of the Christ.

The first coming is the one we celebrate at Christmas, the coming of Jesus, born of Mary, in the town of Bethlehem. The first coming foretold by the prophet Isaiah, “Oh, that you would tear the heavens open and come down!” We cannot save ourselves. It is God alone who saves. “You are our Father, we the clay, you the potter, we are all the work of your hand.” Make us, mould us, heal us – that is the cry of Advent. The cry that was first answered in the stable at Bethlehem.

It is this Jesus who is present to us today. Calling us afresh to come to him,

to depend on him, to trust in him, every day of our life. It is this Jesus whose coming, his daily coming, into our ordinary and everyday life, that St Paul celebrates joyfully this morning “I never stop thanking God for all the graces you have received through Jesus Christ. I thank him that you have been enriched in so many ways.” Day in and day out; it is so easy for us to take him for granted. To forget that he is here, with us. To forget that, whenever we become lost, he comes to save us, to rehabilitate us, to wake us up.

This Jesus will return, at the end of the world, to take all of history to himself. To the world itself into his loving arms. The Good Shepherd of the individual, he is the Good Shepherd of the world. It is he who, according to Paul, “will keep you steady and without blame until the last day, the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

‘But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert: for you do not know when the time will come.’

There is time for all of us to make our response. Time for the whole world to make its response. The world to which we are called, to be Ambassadors for Christ. The world to which we are called, to enfold in the loving arms of the Father.

May God bless you, in your work in the year ahead. For the kingdom of God. Happy New year! ‘What I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.’