

Advent Reflection 1 – Mark 13:33-37

“Take heed, keep on the alert; for you do not know when the appointed time will come...What I say to you I say to all, ‘Be on the alert!’”

The setting for today’s gospel has Christ sitting on the Mt. of Olives looking at the Temple and talking about the dreaded last days of tribulation, destruction and war before his second coming. One has to read the whole chapter to understand the reading, which comprises the last five verses of the chapter.

What Jesus is doing is warning us that difficult times will precede his return. He is telling us not to lose heart or faith. He is urging us to persevere. He warns us against quick solutions or easy escapes and the seduction of false messiahs, prophets, or gurus. He wants perseverance and faithfulness with at least one of our eyes in a state of careful watchfulness at all times with sobriety and wisdom. This is not a time to be naïve or foolish.

That being said, let us confess that most of us live daily lives that are somewhat more benign and less threatening. Daily survival for us and our loved ones is not in question. The scariness of Mark chapter 13 is like something straight out of a Hollywood film. So why start the joyful preparation for the great feast of Christ’s birth with such an ominous tone that seems completely removed from our daily lives? I think the answer lies in our fundamental experience of life itself. Christ is born and the angels rejoice, while the Holy Innocents of Bethlehem are slaughtered. Christ heals and brings forgiveness, yet is rejected and crucified. Life is always an experience of contradictions. We have joy and grief daily. We see beauty and ugliness daily. We are loved and hated daily. This is our world and so while we prepare to remember the first coming of Christ, we cannot forget that at the same time we await his return when he will come to judge us all. We must stay alert.

In Palestine the preparation for Christmas in Bethlehem is a great joy. For a few days a year this small town seems like the center of the world for Christians. There was a time 60 years ago when Christians were 80% of the population. Now they are 20%. Yet its identity remains solely in the event of Christ’s birth. The local municipality begins to clean the entire city. Lights are put up, trees are decorated, and Christmas music plays on the street. The city prepares to welcome the entire world with the warmth and hospitality for which Palestinians are renowned. For a brief moment, all barriers are transcended and joy reigns.

Advent Reflection 2 – Mark 1:1-8

“After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.” Mark 1:7

Today we have the opening lines of the gospel of Mark in our Sunday reading. As the oldest of the gospels, Mark gives us no birth narratives, no mention of Bethlehem and Jesus as the Davidic messiah. Rather he chooses to open with words from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 40:3: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” While this verse may not mean much to us, it was a key verse used by the Qumran community (think Dead Sea Scrolls here) to inspire and lead them back to the wilderness around the Dead Sea in prophetic judgment against the Jerusalem priests and the temple. They understood the desert wilderness to be the place of new beginnings far from the corruption of Jerusalem and the impurity of the world. They believed that they would help usher in a new redemption with their “teacher of righteousness” as the messiah. Mark would have known about them as he wrote about the same time that the Romans came and destroyed not just Jerusalem but also the Qumran community complex.

At stake here is not just how biblical texts were used by different people within their religious communities in first century Palestine, but rather how the Christian understanding survived and later flourished even until today.

Mark opens his gospel essentially with a promise, a promise so extraordinary that the greatest prophet of old claims that he is not worthy to be “the Coming One’s” slave. If we confess that Jesus is the Christ, then we must do so solely with the words of John the Baptist and confess our unworthiness. We must do so not with a false piety, but in the deep stirrings of our soul. Perhaps in addition to our neck crosses we should add a tiny pair of sandals to remind us that the one whom we proclaim and who has enabled us to share in the life of God through the gift of the Holy Spirit is beyond us. “I am not worthy,” says John the Baptist, greatest born of women. And since we, when we are at our best and noblest are still one notch below John, we also must confess even more, “we are not worthy.” In this confession, is the beginning of thanksgiving. In this confession is the seed of wisdom and humility. In this confession is the beginning and basis of all Christian service to others.

Palestinian Christians are a double minority in relation both to Jews and Muslims.

By definition this places them in the most vulnerable of situations. It can be both humbling and humiliating depending on the unpredictable circumstances of daily life. One of their joys is to share freely their faith and heritage with others. When we visit Bethlehem for Christmas, it is important to remember that we are entering into their “home” to celebrate with them. Often the local people are unwittingly pushed aside as 50,000 people flood Bethlehem to celebrate the birth of Christ. We go to share and celebrate together, this is their gift to us, freely given. So wherever we find ourselves this Christmas, remember this simple offering by your brothers and sisters who still dwell in the city of Christ’s birth.

Advent Reflection 3 – John 1:6-8, 19-28

“There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light.” John 1:6-8

John, similar to Mark, does not show any interest in Bethlehem or narratives of Christ's birth. He even pushes against the trend of the other gospels to link John the Baptist with Elijah or the last great prophet in the line of Moses. Instead, like Mark, he relies on the text from Isaiah 40:3 about being the great messenger sent from God, a voice crying in the wilderness to all who want to hear.

For those of us who have spent time in the wilderness, it has a very distinct and powerful character. Jerusalem and Bethlehem are also on the very edge of it geographically. The wilderness by itself cannot sustain ordinary human life. There are no cities or villages, no great buildings or signs of civilization. At best, one would find a few Bedouin tents standing tenaciously as the only sign of human activity, at least before the modern era of water pipes, pumping stations and electricity that now allows humans to live in what use to be inhabitable places. Therefore the wilderness belongs to no one and being waterless was always viewed as the lifeless stronghold of the devil. Hence for the Israelites in their passage through the Red Sea, it was a place of testing to see if they could trust the God who had brought them out of slavery in Egypt. To live there required the daily miracle of divine providence.

To confess that John the Baptist comes from the wilderness means that he comes outside of the normal religious establishment. To come from the wilderness means that he is being sent as a direct revelation of God outside of the Jerusalem temple and priesthood. Therefore John the Baptist comes as the last and great sign of the coming of the Lord himself. Hence his coming, his testimony, marks the end of one era and the first witness of the new era of God's messiah. If you read the entire first chapter, you will see how John the Evangelist puts this all together.

Now for our purposes, John introduces the universal image of light. It needs no explanation to anyone, young or old. Darkness is terrifying in all of its layers of meaning and experience. We all need and want light. So why the need for someone to bear witness to the obvious? Why is it so important for the gospel writer to stress the Baptist's testimony as a key element to his narrative? The answer can only lie in the fact of Christ being rejected and then crucified. Who in their right mind would reject the light and choose instead terrifying darkness?

The capacity of us humans to lose our way seems limitless. It is around us all the time. Living on the seam between Jerusalem and Bethlehem at Tantur Ecumenical Institute, we look out and see the ghastly wall that now encircles Bethlehem. Checkpoint 300 is the only way in if you are coming from Jerusalem. Israelis say it saves lives. Palestinians say it is the ultimate sign of occupation and imprisonment. There is no doubt we have lost our way. We assume help will come from Washington, Jerusalem, or perhaps a European capital, but alas this has not happened. Biblically speaking, the only help will come from voices outside of the establishment, voices from the wilderness not corrupted by self-interest, fear and greed. For our purposes this advent season, we best heed the voice of John and rediscover again in baptismal newness that Christ alone is the light!

Advent Reflection 4 – Luke 1:26-38

“For with God, nothing will be impossible. Then Mary said, ‘Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.’” Luke 1:37-38

The Bible is full of miraculous events demonstrating the power of God. Creation itself in Genesis is simply a result of God continuing to proclaim: “Let there be...” The miraculous, while it astounds us, is simply an act of God and not the human person.

The closest thing to the miraculous story of the birth of Christ is that of Isaac. Here God waited until Sarah was 99 and beyond the possibility of having children and Abraham was 100. Hence the child to be born was to be the child of promise, a gift from God and not the result of normal procreation. The point is simply that God is intervening in a unique way in the life of Abraham and Sarah with a view towards his divine plan for the larger world. But essentially Isaac will always be just the son of Abraham, the child of the promise.

In contrast, the birth story of Jesus is beyond being just another miracle, but an “eschatological event” to quote one scripture scholar. Or in simpler terms, it is “the event of events” signaling the end of one era and the beginning of a new one. If you will, it is a new creative act beyond that of Genesis 1 but this time intimately involving a young virgin woman, Mary by name, betrothed to a man named Joseph. Now let’s be honest and acknowledge that the gospels say very little about the Virgin Mary. The Church in later generations will not find this acceptable and bring in non-biblical stories and theology related to her. None of this is of interest in this reflection because it is not of interest to Luke in his gospel. What is of interest is Mary’s offering of herself in an act of faith. Later on in Luke 11:27, a woman will call out from the crowd: “Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that nursed you!” In other words, “Thank God for your mother!” But Christ’s response redirects the idea of blessing and good fortune when he responds: “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it.” This is the key to blessedness. This is the key to understanding all things, especially the great event of Christ’s birth and any other subsequent acts of hearing, believing, and doing what God commands. It is not enough for us to be passive listeners and wonderers of great past events, biblical, saintly or other. We are not let off the hook when it comes to offering ourselves to God in the same manner as the young Virgin Mary. Our “let it be” must forever be a response to God’s “let it be.” In this the power of the creative God continues to enter into a world ripped apart by human passion and sin. That being said, the Virgin Mary is unique. She alone is the birth-giver and mother of Christ.

Amongst the local Palestinian Christians, there are three saints who are most beloved. St George the great-martyr who was born in Lod (between Jerusalem and modern Tel Aviv), the Prophet Elijah whose miracles and stories are told and commemorated everywhere, and then finally the Virgin Mary. Here she is simply called “the Virgin,” the young woman who brings blessedness to Bethlehem and beyond. What began at a certain point in time, first century, and place, Bethlehem, has now spread throughout the world to us. We are now able to celebrate the birth of Christ!