

Third Sunday of Advent – Year B – December 14, 2014
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; (Psalm 126); Canticle 15 (Magnificat); 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24;
John 1:6-8, 19-28

By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

Advent: Turning the World Upside Down

The prayer that traditionally collects us together on this third Sunday of Advent begins: “Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us...” I’ll come back to that. But let’s begin with today’s second reading. It is probably the earliest of Paul’s letters to the churches he founded, making it the first and oldest part of the New Testament. This Thessalonian church began in an uproar. Salonika, or Thessaloniki as the Greeks call their city, in St. Paul’s time was a prosperous and cosmopolitan city within the Roman Empire, and it had a synagogue. As was Paul’s custom in his missionary journeys, he began there explaining to the worshippers that the Messiah of whom he spoke had been foretold in their Scriptures. His testimony and argument were convincing to some of this Jewish congregation, and also to many Gentile Greeks apart from the synagogue, including a number of influential women. However, as described in the 17th chapter of Acts, Paul’s success there in Thessaloniki inflamed other members of the synagogue. Some incited a riot at which they accused Paul and Silas of seditious motives, and then shouted to the authorities, “These people who have been turning the world upside down, have come here also.”

You see, if you are content with your world, you will not welcome One who will change it—who will turn it upside down. You will not welcome the One who will stir up his power and come among us with great might and humility, truth and goodness, and who will change things. That One is the God the Hebrew prophets knew and foretold. But if we invite God to stir up His power and with great might come among us, God will turn us and our world upside down.

People on the margins welcome such a God. It’s important to note that whenever God is presented in the Bible as coming in judgment, *that* is a reference to liberation. Today’s first reading is a wonderful example of that. The judgment of God does not mean that God sits and judges, as on a royal throne. Judgment in the Bible means that God helps the poor gain their rights and liberates them from oppression. Therefore, the notion of God as a judge should be a joyful one. This is the rejoicing referred to in this Third Sunday of Advent, also known as *Gaudete* Sunday, from the Latin for “Rejoice.” (symbolized in the pink candle on our Advent Wreath). We hear such rejoicing in the pregnant Mary’s song, (our Canticle 15) the Magnificat, rejoicing in the God whom she was making incarnate, the One who was coming to occupy humanity, as it were—the One who would show strength with his arm and scatter the proud in their conceit; who would cast down the mighty from their thrones and lift up the lowly; who would fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty.

But not so the Thessalonians. They seemed to have come to terms with their world. They had struggled but also thrived in it. They were not looking for any new Advent, or coming

of God. They had shaped a notion of God's presence and God's promises to their convenience and were quite comfortable. Of course, there were certain difficulties. Members of a synagogue in a Roman-dominated city had certain adjustments to make. They had to make their religion exclusively a personal and private thing. They couldn't step out into the public arena. They couldn't question the status quo. They had to observe rigid lives—this for us, that for Caesar. We, too, can become accustomed to that sort of “accepted calm.” Within a certain agreed-upon structure some can live very well. I recall an English bishop once saying, “Everywhere Paul went there was a riot; everywhere I go they [just] serve tea.” Yet our Advent prayers and readings serve notice that God is coming to upset such structure. In our gospel today, God's prophet, the great Advent figure of John the Baptist, comes crashing in upon us. When I think of John the Baptizer I'm reminded of the old spiritual entitled “Wade in the Water” with its wonderful refrain, “God's a gonna trouble the water.” Now, John comes more gently in this gospel than he does in the other gospels, but John the Baptist is a disturbing figure, nevertheless. He comes in our gospel today “as a witness to testify to the light...” (1:7). Now light is a terrifying image to those of us who have learned to love our darkness. We do not want to see everything. And surely we do not want everything about us to be seen.

John the Baptist mystifies the people. He confuses the organized structures and the established expectations. “Who are you?” the authorities ask, not so much expecting a messiah but more so a messianic age that would be ushered in by two figures whom they believed never seemed to have died—Elijah and Moses. But John doesn't pretend to fit into any of the presumptions, categories or identities the authorities have set. Already the messenger—just the messenger—of this new Advent of God was turning their world upside down. Of course the new Advent of God—the one coming into the world in human form, Jesus of Nazareth—would disturb their world and our world all the more.

Despite facing fearful reaction and fear-driven violence, the followers of Jesus offered a new way of living in a most difficult time. Paul established a network of faith communities along the ancient thoroughfares of the Mediterranean world, and our Scriptures include two of his letters to the little church in Thessaloniki. Our reading today gives us evidence that this community was being held to a vision different from much of the rest of the world. Help the weak, do not repay evil for evil, seek to do good to all, rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances. That's counter-cultural—a world turned upside down. If you have made your place in the old order, if you are secure there, you understand the fears of the rest of the Thessalonians. And not only the rich and powerful call out the authorities to stop this new thing. Remember, the Jewish leaders of Thessaloniki were themselves a subject people under the regime of Rome. Yet we can learn to love our chains, or, at least we can become comfortable with them. As Shakespeare's Hamlet says, “I'd rather bear those ills I have, than fly to others which I know not of.”ⁱ

Even though we don't live under such oppressive circumstances, we each of us should ask, “In what ways do I prefer the security of my life, my lifestyle, and my old patterns, even preferring my old sorrows, grudges and discontents? In what ways do I prefer all this to being turned upside down or, maybe, the right way up?” We state that Christ

comes to save us and our world, but often we don't really believe that we need to be saved. This betrays our colossal pride or narrow vision or monumental ignorance. Or, maybe we believe we can't be saved out of our despair or old habits—believing that we or the world are beyond repair.

John testifies in our gospel text, "Among you stands one whom you do not know" (1:26). That still is a challenge to the Church in its assertions that it does know who Jesus is. Whether it portrays Jesus as an infant in a manger, or as the good shepherd, or as the sacrificial Lamb, or as a miracle worker, or as a great teacher, or as the only Son of God, the Church nonetheless can only touch but a facet of Jesus' true identity. Therefore, while we await Jesus in all his fullness this Advent, let us recall that he continues to make himself known in ways and in places that are surprising and, perhaps, unsettling and unwelcome. Jesus turns not only the Church's world upside down, but turns the entire world and all of us upside down as well, so that we may be turned right side up, so that we may make the effort to recognize and love the Jesus who already lives within us and among us—in the poor, the victimized, the friend, the stranger, or in that true self we hide deep within ourselves.

The good news of our readings today is good news to those in whose hearts lives a *divine discontent*. Light is breaking in on the darkness of our fear, our complacency, and our unquestioning contentment with things as they are.

"Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us!"

ⁱ As commented on by Oliver Goldsmith, (in Essays) Goldsmith's Miscellaneous Works (London: William Smith, 1841), p. 95.