

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

The Christ in Our Midst

3B - Advent

Isaiah 61:1-2; 10-11 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 John 1:6-8, 19-28

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Advent is a time we prepare for the coming of the Lord: his coming to us sacramentally at Christmas, his coming to us individually at the end of our lives, and his coming to us collectively at the end of time. Now, let's just suppose we are told that the Christ whom we are waiting for is already here in our midst as one of us. What difference would that make? Let me share with you a story of how enormous a difference the awareness of the presence of Christ among us, could make in our lives as individuals and as communities. A certain monastery was going through a crisis. The young monks were leaving, no new candidates were joining them, and people were no longer coming for prayer and consultation as they used to do. The few monks that remained were becoming old and depressed and bitter in their relationship with one another. The abbot was at a loss. And then he heard about a certain holy man, a hermit living alone in the woods and decided to go visit him. During the visit, the Abbot confided to the hermit how the monastery had declined and diminished and now looks like a skeleton of what it used to be. He explained to the hermit that only seven old monks remained. The hermit told the abbot that he has a secret to share with him. He told the abbot that one of the monks now living in his monastery is actually the Messiah, but he is living in such a way that no one could recognize him. With this revelation the abbot goes back to his monastery, summons a meeting with the remaining monks and recounts what the holy hermit told him. The aging monks look at each other in unbelief, trying to discern who among them could be the Christ. **It has to be Brother Mark** who prays all the time? But then again, he has this holier-than-thou attitude toward others. Well, how about Brother Joseph who is always ready to help others? But he is constantly eating and drinking and never fast. The abbot reminded them that the Messiah has adopted some bad habits as a way of camouflaging his real identity. This only made them more confused and they just could not figure out who was the Christ among them. At the end of the meeting what each one of the monks knew for sure was that any of the other monks, except himself, could indeed be the Christ. From that day, however, the monks began to treat one another with greater respect and humility, knowing that the person they are speaking to could be the very Christ. They began to show more love for one another, their common life became more brotherly and their common prayer more fervent. Slowly people again began to take notice of the change, this new spirit in the monastery and began returning for retreats and spiritual direction. Word began to spread and, before you knew it, candidates began to show up and the monastery began to thrive again in number as the monks grew in zeal and holiness. All this, because a man of God drew their attention to the truth that is so easy to overlook that **Christ was living in their midst as one of them.**

In today's gospel John the Baptist tries to give the same powerful message to the Jews of his time who were anxiously waiting for the coming of the Messiah. John tells them: ***"There is one among you whom you do not recognize, the one who is coming after me; whose sandal strap I am not worthy to untie."***

This Sunday is Gaudete Sunday, it is a Sunday to Rejoice. “Brothers and sisters,” St. Paul says in the second reading, “Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus....May the God of peace make you perfectly holy and may you entirely, spirit, soul, and body, be preserved blameless for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will also accomplish it.”

Rejoice, this Sunday tells us. The Rose vestments remind us that this is a time of great expectations, a time for rejoicing. We have every reason to be full of joy. Rejoice, Christmas is almost here. Rejoice, not so much that we have found Christ, but rejoice because He has found us.

***“The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners*”** The words of our first reading, from the third section of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah were read by Jesus Himself in the Synagogue of Nazareth in what we can call **His very first sermon**. If Jesus is good news for those who are poor and broken-hearted, for those who are abandoned and mistreated, then we as his followers are called to be the same. As Christians we must also proclaim these words. We are anointed by God. We are baptized. And we are sent. We are sent to bring joy to the world. We are to bring glad tidings to the poor, news that God knows their difficulties and will care for them through His people here on earth, Holy Mother the Church. We are to tell the broken hearted that God hears their cries. **There are certainly times that each of us feel lost.** There are times that we feel alone. Especially during this season. But we are not lost. He has found us. We are not alone. He is with us. With Jesus in our lives, the crises we face become challenges, but not devastating events.

If we are mourning the loss of a loved one, we need to hear that the Lord has conquered death and that those who have let Him into their lives will live with Him forever. If our hearts are broken by events beyond our control, the loss of a job, the loss of a marriage, or any series of events that make us feel abandoned by the world, alone in society, we need to know that Jesus is the Mender of Broken Hearts. If we are held captive by others, or perhaps by our own addictions, we need to know that Jesus provides freedom and liberty. We do not have to spend the rest of our lives as victims of society. With Jesus we can be victors, not victims. Jesus is with us always, particularly in the worst of our times. SoRejoice in the Lord!

And so in a few moments when we approach this altar let us receive him with faith, let us ask him for the courage to testify to the coming of the Messiah like John the Baptist did, and let us ask Mary, our Blessed Mother to help us on our way as we bear witness to the Messiah of God. As always let us ask him to guide our thoughts, our feelings and our actions.

The Jews of his time did not recognize Jesus as the Messiah because they had definite ideas on how the Messiah was going to come. The Messiah would suddenly appear from nowhere in his majestic, divine power and glory and establish his reign by destroying the enemies of Israel. No one would know where he came from except that he came from God. So when finally Jesus came, born of a woman they knew, just like every other person in the community, they did not recognize him. He was too ordinary, too familiar, too unimpressive. How about us my brothers and sisters? After 2000 years, are we still looking for the Messiah or are we able to recognize Christ in the persons of the ordinary and familiar men and women in our midst with their unimpressive habits, backgrounds, and looks?

Please allow me to share this personal story with you. Earlier this year, things were not going too well for the Swan family. One of our grandsons, 1 year old Colin Swan, was in the hospital fighting for his life. I have had two auto accidents within the last three months and was recovering from the Shingles. It was a cold, gloomy and wet February morning. I went into the Kroger Grocery store right here on Tara Blvd to get something. I was stressed and in a hurry. I parked my car, ran into the store, picked up what I needed, paid for it and headed out the door when I came to a complete stop. You see, it had started to rain and rain heavy and I had no umbrella with me and it was cold. I did not remember where I had parked my car anddid not remember what car I was driving. Did I mention, I had two accidents in three months? Well, my car was in the shop because of one of those accidents and I was driving a rental and did not remember what kind of car it was. As I was standing there at the entrance looking out in the parking lot through the rain, trying to find my car I felt a presence next to me or should I say, I smelt a presence next to me. I looked and there was this man with his palm out asking me, "Sir, can you get me something to eat?" The man's face was covered with facial hair that was matted with mucus and saliva, his eyes were bloodshot, the jacket he was wearing was stained and dirty as was his skullcap that he had on. It was a strange request. "Can you get me something to eat?" Most of them will ask for money to go and get another drink to keep them high but this man was asking for food, knowing I had just come out of a grocery store with a bag of grocery in my hand. Normally, I would help him out but ... at that moment, there was not an ounce of Christianity in me. I turned to the man and said, "Look, I am trying to find my car. Leave me alone, just GO AWAY!" I ran into the parking lot oblivious of the rain because I just wanted to get away from this man. I went up one aisle of the parking lot and then down another when I spotted my car and was putting the bag of grocery in when I noticed that this guy was standing next to me with his palm out and open. I wondered how he got to where I was so fast and in this rain but he was persistent and that is something I admire in a person ... persistence. I reached into my pocket and took out the change that the store clerk has given me. I remember having some loose change, a one dollar bill and a five dollar bill and was going to give him the loose change but then decided to give him the one dollar bill because it

was raining and cold and he was persistent. But when I reached for the one dollar bill I realize I was reaching for the five dollar bill instead. I said to myself, "Well, what the heck, I Guess it was meant to be," so I gave him the five dollar bill instead. He took the bill, crumbled it up, put his hand in his pocket, turned and walked away without a single word of thank you or appreciation. I said under my breath, "Good riddance," and proceeded to get in to the car when I saw the guy turn around, walk back to me while taking his hand out of his pocket. I said to myself, "Peter, brace yourself. This guy is going to mug you and steal your car. Thank God the car is a rental." The man opened his palm and there in his hand was my five dollar bill and also a roll of twentys, tens, fives and one dollar bills. He said, "Sir, I really do not need your money. I was just checking to see if there was any kindness still left in this world. Here is the five dollar bill that you gave me and" and out of the roll of bills that he had, he took out another five dollar bill and handed it to me and said, "What you did for me, I in turn do back to you. Now what I have done for you, I hope you will continue to do for someone else. Thank you for your kindness." He then turned and walked away. I just stood there, again, oblivious of the rain, I looked down at my palm and there were now two five dollar bills in it. I said to myself, "What in the world just happened. Am I not in a Kroger parking lot? Am I not in Clayton County?" I looked up and saw this man quickly disappearing between the parked cars and into the rain. I got into the car wondering, who was that man? Was he a homeless drunk, a vagabond really in need of food or was he an angel, send to Pete Swan at that particular time in his life to remind him to get off his sad horse, feeling sorry for himself and go out and live the Christian life, doing good to others ... or was he The Christ? The Unrecognizable Christ in Our Midst!

Look around you my brothers and sisters, go ahead, look to your left and to your right. Can you for sure tell me that the person sitting next to you is not the Messiah? I pray that during this Advent Season, we will each be able to find the Messiah, the Christ living in our midst.

How can we be anything other than positive? So on this third Sunday of Advent, as we continue to prepare and wait for the Lord, I say to you, "Rejoice!"

The Lord is on watch. He is always near. The Lord is my shepherd. I walk with no fear.

From me and my family to you and yours, "May you have a Joyful and Holy Christmas."

