

4th Sunday of Advent 2018

(Mic 5:1-4a; Heb 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45)

Since we are now so deeply into Advent--almost to its end, we should be fostering the spirit of Christmas. How do we go about doing that? Well, we know it doesn't consist in Christmas trees and wreaths. Not in much of what passes as "Christmas music" on the radio--"Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer," or "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas." We need more of "Angels bending near the earth to touch their harps of gold." But most of all we should find the spirit of Christmas in our Scripture readings.

Today's reading from Micah is a good place to begin. We will encounter this same passage from Micah again at Epiphany, when the Magi come to Jerusalem asking where the king of the Jews was to be born. Naturally they would expect to find him at Jerusalem, the capital city. However, Micah informs us (and, indirectly, the Magi) that the place the new king will be born is the lowly town of Bethlehem-Ephrathah, "too small to be among the clans of Judah." That place is symbolic of the ancient guarantee to David and his line--the source of all messianic hope. This represents a return to origins the Davidic succession, the surety of eventual salvation. In the original OT text of Micah, there is a contrast between Bethlehem and Jerusalem and with Hezekiah, the ruling king at the time. "They have laid siege against us; with the rod they strike on the cheek the ruler of Israel." Hezekiah, one of Israel's better kings, foolishly, and against the advice of Isaiah, had

revolted against the Assyrian empire and so brought on the siege. The new king, the one who is to come will not engage in power politics, but will be, like David, a shepherd.

This ideal of a return to Davidic roots is found also in Isaiah, prophesying in the same time period, though using different imagery. We find this in a passage we read earlier in Advent: "A shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse,/ and from his roots a bud shall blossom./ .../ Not by appearance shall he judge,/ nor by hearsay shall he decide,/ But he shall judge the poor with justice,/ and decide fairly for the land's afflicted./ He shall strike the ruthless with the rod of his mouth,/ and with the breath of lips he shall slay the wicked./ Justice shall be the band around his waist,/ and faithfulness a belt upon his hips."

After the portrait of this ideal just king, who is concerned for the poor and helpless, and who destroys the wicked, there follows a picture of what writers and artists call "the peaceable kingdom," in which "The wolf shall be a guest of the lamb/ ... The calf and the young lion shall browse together, with a little child to guide them./ The baby shall play by the viper's den,/ and the child shall lay its hand on the adder's lair./ They shall not harm or destroy on all my holy mountain" (Isa 11:1-9).

An idealistic picture, to be sure, but it does illustrate an important saying. It was Pope Paul VI who formulated it so well: "If you want peace, work for ...[justice]."? That's good; but let's have greater enthusiasm: "If you want peace, work for ...[justice]."

There are different kinds of violence. One kind is surely when the "haves" use their leverage to deprive the "have nots" in their need. The OT prophets give us many instances in which rich landlords, merchants, and rulers used their means to defraud the poor, as also, but in subtler ways, we see in our own society. This kind of violence creates another violence, as can clearly be seen in the uprising of Czarist Russia, the French revolution, and, in its own way, our own American revolution. Our own society, as all agree, is divided as never before, and we know why.

Have we wandered too far from Advent and Christmas? I think not. Just as Micah saw the Messiah arising not in Jerusalem, the affluent capital, but in Bethlehem-Ephrathah, so the Messiah forerunner is David, here seen as a shepherd. When the imagery changes to a king-figure, it is to a king girt with justice for the poor.

We acknowledge Jesus as king, but He did not come in might. What is most emphasized is His obedience; this we see it especially in today's reading from the Epistle to the Hebrews. The author quotes Jesus as summing up his mission with the words, "As is written of me in the scroll, 'Behold, I come to do you will'." Any of us whose Christmas piety remains on the level of "holy infant so tender and mild" are reminded of the cost with which our new David carried out His mission; Hebrews goes on to specify, "By this 'will' we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Christ once for all."

Is Christmas simply to be enjoyed or does it call us to something? We know it contains a call, namely, to

complete the redemptive work of Christ. We know we do this by carrying out His command, "Love one another as I have loved you." Absolutely opposed to this is the familiar mind-set expressed as "Looking out for number one," "number one being "me." Suppose when Gabriel invited Mary to become the Mother of God, she had said, "All you say sounds good for the kid, but what's in it for me?" we would not be looking forward to Christmas, because there would be no Savior.

Not Scripture but the philosophers say, "Bonum est diffusivum sui," roughly translated "goodness always tends to spread." I'd rather expand it to its true sense: "That which is truly good necessarily spreads itself abroad." Look at God. He was totally self-sufficient; nothing could be added to Him. He could have chosen an inaccessible spot in the universe for all eternity. But instead He chose to create millions and billions of beings so He could share His glory and His joy with them.

Let us look to the human sphere. Here are two billionaires. One, let's call him Tom Gates, sees many in dire need, so he uses his resources to establish charitable trusts to relieve needs of many kinds. (Goodness spreads itself abroad.) The other one establishes a trust, but uses it only to enrich himself ("looking out for number one"). (He is the Grinch who stole Christmas from hundreds of thousands of children.)

On the national level, "looking out for number one" is called nationalism. Instead of thinking in terms of keeping peace by helping poorer nations lift themselves out of

poverty, of building unity among nations through alliances, it's "my nation alone and let all others fend for themselves."

But this not the way God plans for us, as the Bible shows. Throughout their long history Israel and Egypt and Assyria were deadly enemies of one another. Throughout its long history, God could call Israel "my people" and "my heritage" and "the work of my hands." But in the Book of Isaiah we find the words of an enlightened prophet telling how it would be in the last days: "On that day there shall be a highway [not a wall] from Egypt to Assyria; the Assyrians shall enter Egypt, and the Egyptians enter Assyria, and the Egyptians shall worship with the Assyrians. On that day Israel shall be a third party with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, when the LORD of hosts gives this blessing: 'Blessed be my people Egypt, and the work of my hands Assyria, and my heritage, Israel.'"

The angels at Bethlehem on Christmas night sang to shepherds, "Glory to God in the highest and peace to those on whom his favor rests." We will truly celebrate Christmas and be among those on whom God's favor rests if we promote peace by loving others as we love ourselves and peoples of all nations.