

A Sermon by Fr. Davenport
2 December 2007

Advent I, Year A

Isaiah 2:1-5

Romans 13:11-14

Matthew 24:36-44

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In every age, Christians have gone out to the wilderness to meet God and deepen their relationship with him. Carlo Carretto was one of the most influential 'desert fathers' of the 20th century. He left his Italy and spent a decade as a monk living with the Bedouin of the Sahara Desert, an experience which seems to have done much to inspire his criticism of the Church's triumphalism, legalism, and clericalism. He wrote a testimony about his spiritual journey and concluded it this way:

How much I must criticize you, my church and yet how much I love you!
You have made me suffer more than anyone and yet I owe you more than I owe anyone.
I should like to see you destroyed and yet I need your presence.
You have given me much scandal and yet you alone have made me understand holiness.
Never in the world have I seen anything more obscurantist, more compromised, more false, yet never have I touched anything more pure, more generous or more beautiful.
Countless times I have felt like slamming the door of my soul in your face – and yet, every night, I have prayed that I might die in your arms!
No, I cannot be free of you, for I am one with you, even if not completely you.
Then too – where should I go?
To build another church?
But I cannot build another church without the same defects, for they are my own defects.
And again, if I were to build another church, it would be my church, not Christ's church.
No, I am old enough. I know better!

Harboring fantasies about the Church or ourselves is harmful to the health of our souls! I think that warning is particularly relevant to this morning. In a few moments, we will have a rite admitting some among us to the catechumenate. They are committing to learn about Jesus and his body, the Church. Among the catechumens are those preparing for baptism, for confirmation, for reception into the Anglican Communion, for re-affirmation, each a very significant step deepening their life in Christ and his Church, his defective, yet divine Church.

It's a moment to recognize, yet again, that we can always rely upon Jesus, always trust him, always be sure of his love and care for us. And yet, his Church is flawed, at times absurd, hypocritical, corrupt, petty – far removed from, even obstructing, the glory of God and his gospel. But here's the other side of the truth: the Church still conveys God's love, his glory, his good

¹ Carlo Carretto in *I Sought and I Found* (DLT, 1984) quoted by Ronald Rolheiser, *Forgotten Among the Lilies*, Doubleday (2005), pp. 303-304.

news, his presence. Despite all of its weaknesses and annoyances, the Church is still lovable. We're strengthened by it and deeply grateful for it.

Carretto says that he won't build his own church because he's old enough that he knows better. He has the spiritual maturity to know his own weaknesses and shadows. We can't do better on our own. Rather, we throw our lot in with one another. The deeper truth of humanity is that we're all in this together. We need one another, especially people different from ourselves.

In the Rite of Admission, the biggest, most difficult pledge is not being made by the catechumens, but by the rest of the congregation, vowing to welcome, guide, and support these catechumens in our prayers, in our example, in our personal witness. We pray to be signs of God's love and true examples of what it means to follow him, a mighty lofty goal.

Repeatedly, the gospel shows us impediments to following Jesus. In today's gospel, Jesus directs us to watch, to be prepared at any moment for the culmination of history, but he doesn't tell us when. Ever since the Ascension, Christians have speculated about when Christ will return. We've not been able to endure the uncertainty faithfully. Some of us have tried to calculate when it will happen. It distracts us from what's most important, from staying focused on Christ's mission and ministry, from building relationships and loving one another.

For most of us, I doubt that apocalyptic anticipation is a spiritual problem. Instead, we're probably more likely not to take the Second Coming seriously enough, that is we don't think enough about the future and the urgency of being prepared for God. If you knew that the Second Coming was going to happen at 3:18 this afternoon - in the middle of the Redskins' game, what would you do between now and then? What if it was Thursday evening at 7:42? How would you prepare? What things in your life would you try to sort out? With whom would you seek reconciliation? To whom would you reach out?

If Christ were coming this week, we'd probably be willing to re-jigger our schedules a bit. We might see all our pressing obligations in a different light. We might make a little more time for family, friends, even strangers, and we might be a little more generous toward them. We might be able to concentrate our hearts and minds for more prayer and solitude. We might even find it easier to relax.

Our busy-ness is an impediment to following Christ. In today's gospel, the men in the field and the women grinding meal are too absorbed with their daily occupations and so not prepared for Christ. We're so focused on everyday affairs and on our ordinary desires that we lose focus on Christ's mission and ministry. We're so focused on everyday affairs and on our ordinary desires that we don't reflect on the final things, on our future, on the big picture. When we imagine the end, we can begin to see the meaning of the present and the big picture.

Our complacency, our distraction, our dullness, our jaded satiety - these are more likely our spiritual problems. The Church gives us Advent to renew us. Advent tells us that God is coming, that he is near, that it's time to wake up to what really matters. Here's the irony: we wake up by slowing down. In this most hectic, frenzied of seasons, the world's perverse celebration of Christmas, the Church urges rest and quietness.

We prepare for Christ's coming, we allow ourselves to recognize his presence, by making silence and solitude a bigger part of our lives. Over time, there's probably nothing we can do better for our spiritual health, for our relationship with Christ, than making room in each day for half an hour of silence. Few things will have such a profound impact upon our lives than creating some quiet and reflection. Its fruits are awareness, gratitude, peace, joy.

Prayer and quietness prepare us for Christ. God shocked the world when he came in human flesh. Most couldn't fathom it. It was too new, too strange, too unexpected. Jesus says that he comes like a thief in the night. He's a surprise. Prayer and quietness help us recognize Christ in the surprises of life. We wake up by slowing down.

Last Wednesday, the catechumenate watched *Babette's Feast*, a beautiful film set in a small, outwardly pious, Christian community. On a couple of occasions visitors came to this community, looking for more in life, but the community was unwilling to accept and incorporate them because the visitors were too different. The visitors wouldn't conform to the community's terms. If the community had been able to open themselves to the visitors, to integrate and to honor their differences, to learn from them, it would have had a burst of new life and energy, but it couldn't. The surprise of these strangers was too much for them. The community couldn't evolve and re-invent itself, and it began to die off, too stuck in its ways, too certain of what faithfulness should look like.

In the gospel, a centurion – a pagan, a Roman oppressor – came and begged Jesus to speak the word only because it would heal his ailing son. A Canaanite woman came and begged Jesus to heal her daughter. Jesus told her that he was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel, not to dogs, the status she had as an outsider. These outsiders had faith. They surprised Jesus, and he opened to them.

Often in the gospels, however, Jesus encountered people who had no faith, often people who were quite close to him. He could do no miracles in his hometown. John the Baptist heard a voice from heaven when he baptized Jesus, but later he doubted Jesus' identity. The apostles abandoned Jesus at the cross and doubted the women when they reported the empty tomb. Even after Jesus appeared resurrected, some of the apostles doubted. (Mt 28:17) These all lacked faith. They cut themselves off from surprise. Too certain, too distracted, they were unaware of God's nearness, unable to see him.

Philip Yancey observes all of this, and he concludes, "A curious law of reversal seems to be at work in the Gospels: faith appears where least expected and falters where it should be thriving."

We need to be surprised, shocked, a little unsettled. It's good for us. It helps us recognize God's presence where we would've never expected it... like a baby in a manger or perhaps simply in a stranger.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

² Philip Yancey, *Finding God in Unexpected Places*, Doubleday (2005), pp. 205-07.

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