

Homily for 2nd Sunday of Advent
December 8th and 9th

The Two Songs

A week ago, I was reading a homily by St. Augustine in which he talks about how in this life we love to sing as Christians, however our song is tinged with anxiety; whereas when in heaven we will sing with full security. Throughout the homily he contrasts our present anxious song with our future secure song. He then concludes with these stirring words:

O the happiness of the heavenly song, sung in security, in fear of no adversity! We shall have no enemies in heaven, we shall never lose a friend. God's praises are sung both there and here, but here they are sung by those destined to die, there, by those destined to live for ever; here they are sung in hope, there, in hope's fulfillment; here they are sung by wayfarers, there, by those living in their own country.¹

St. Augustine captures something that I think is intensified during December. At no time of the year do we hear more music, sing more songs. At the same time many experience an increase of anxiety as the countless challenges, confusions and consternations of life's journey are associated with the painful memories, demands and expectations experienced in these days.

On this second Sunday of Advent present anxiety and future security are brought into focus in our readings. Undergirding this theme is the declaration that what we believe in as Christians is historical, because the events central to our faith can be located at specific time and place. St. Luke gives more details on Jesus' infancy, and childhood than the other three evangelists so as to root Jesus in time. Then in chapter 3, he introduces Jesus 3-year public ministry by reference to John the Baptist. He says John's ministry began:

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius

Luke was a historian unfolding his account of Jesus' ministry by setting it in a very anxious time historically. Let me tell you a little bit about four of the people mentioned in Luke's list. There was a Roman Historian Suetonius whose *Lives of the Caesars* chronicled the stories of each emperor. He tells us Tiberius began to reign as Emperor of Rome in the year 14 A.D. and reigned all the way up to 37 A.D. The 15th year of his reign locates the beginning of John and Jesus' ministry in 29 AD. This means he was emperor during the 3 public years of Jesus traveling through the Holy Land.

Suetonius tells us that of all the Caesars Tiberius was one of the most debauched. And that's saying a lot if you compare the debauchery and the depravity of figures like Nero and Caligula. During Tiberius' reign it was a peaceful time in the Roman Empire. One of the Roman historians said all was quiet under the reign of Tiberius, and that's true. On the other hand, Tiberius' own personal life was extremely depraved. He engaged in public displays of sexual immorality. He

¹ Office of Readings Saturday for the 34th Saturday in Ordinary Time

also murdered those who would not commend and support him in these things. So, he was a murderous and depraved individual who died by being smothered to death in his bed.²

What about Pilate? According to Philo of Alexandria, a Jewish writer who was a contemporary of Jesus, living in Egypt in the early First Century A.D, he described Pontius Pilate's character this way:

Pilate's corruption, and his acts of insolence, his violent seizure of people's property, and his habit of insulting people, and his cruelty, and his continual murders of people untried and uncondemned, and his never ending, and gratuitous, and most grievous inhumanity.³

So, Tiberius was a completely debauched Emperor, Pilate was a corrupt and evil governor. What about Annas and Caiaphas the two high priests that are mentioned? Another Jewish historian, Josephus tells us that both were deposed from their high priesthood for various wicked acts in which they were engaged.

Talk about anxiety and challenges. So often when we look at the world in which we live, we can be overwhelmed with the bad news so that our earthly song is tinged with anxiety.

But listen to what St. Luke is doing here. Having told us the bad news he then says:

the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod was ruler of Galilee, remember him, he had John the Baptist Beheaded, his brother Philip, Lysanias, Annas and Caiaphas, these were the people making the headlines and people thought what kind of world are we living in? How bad can the news get!

But even in a world like the one Jesus lived in and the one we live in God was and is active, his word coming to John, in the Wilderness.

So why in the wilderness? We need to understand something of Jewish History to appreciate this reference. In 722 the 10 Northern Tribes were taken into Exile by a superpower called Assyria. Subsequent to their captivity these ten tribes scattered, never to be reunited. They are known as the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. 125 years later the two southern tribes, Judah and Benjamin were also taken into captivity by the Babylonians. Isaiah the prophet spoke about how God would make a way for the tribes to return to Jerusalem and that such a journey would be along a wilderness road. It is here Luke quotes directly from Isaiah 40:

***Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.
5 Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.' "***

² file:///C:/Users/JonathanGibson/OneDrive%20-%20St.%20Peter's%20Parish%20Calgary/Sunday%20Homily%20Year%20C/Advent/Pitre%20Advemt%202.pdf

³ Philo, Embassy to Gaius, 302

Why do the paths need to be made straight and the valleys filled and so on? A highway will be built for the Exiles to return so that people will see God's salvation. It is this theme on display in the Psalm as well:

*When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.
2 Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
"The LORD has done great things for them."
3 The LORD has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.*

This is the language of those who had been scattered now being reunited. Zion is another name for Jerusalem. So, when the people are all gathered together what joy and celebration.

Baruch was speaking of this same theme in our Old Testament Reading:

*Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height;
look toward the east,
and see your children gathered from west and east
at the word of the Holy One,
rejoicing that God has remembered them.
6 For they went out from you on foot,
led away by their enemies;
but God will bring them back to you,
carried in glory, as on a royal throne.
7 For God has ordered that every high mountain and the everlasting hills be made low
and the valleys filled up, to make level ground,
so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God.*

One of the reasons why many Jewish people cannot accept Jesus is the Messiah is because this literal return from Exile never happened. However, Luke recognizes that in Jesus God is not reuniting Israel but doing something through the 12 Apostles, for which John the Baptist will prepare the way. He is establishing a New Israel, which isn't a territory defined by national borders but rather a citizenry who realize that throughout this world we are still in exile. It is now that we are on the highway leading us to the New Jerusalem where in the language of St. Augustine, we will sing the song of security because there, hope's destiny will be realized.

On this Second Sunday of Advent the Church invites us to remember that in this world bad news will always get more air time because this world isn't our home. But God's word – Jesus Christ, still comes to those who sing anxiety's song in this Land of Exile because we know that one day

we will no longer be wayfarers but heaven's citizens where we will for ages unending sing the Song of Security.

So during this Advent and Christmas Season sing as those who know their destination and with John the Baptist declare:

*Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.*