Come, Lord Jesus! 2

December 4th, 2017

2nd Sunday of Advent

 "And his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6), says Isaiah the prophet when looking forward to the coming Messiah. Jesus Christ, whom we celebrate and worship every Sunday, and whom we especially celebrate during Advent and Christmas, is this Prince of Peace. This is the One who said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid" (John 14:27). And this is the One whom we expect to come again, to bring the completion of peace to this world. In Jesus we have peace. In fact, Jesus is the very embodiment of peace, the Incarnation of peace. If we want to know what peace is, we need to look to Christ. It is Christ who taught us the meaning of peace when he spoke the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12, Luke 6:20-23). To be peaceful is to be poor in spirit; to be peaceful is to mourn; to be peaceful is to be meek; to be peaceful is hunger and thirst for righteousness; to be peaceful is to be merciful; to be peaceful is to be pure in heart; to be peaceful is to be a peacemaker; to be peaceful is to be persecuted for righteousness's sake; to be peaceful is to be reviled for the Name of Jesus. It is to be salt and light; it is to be the light of the world. It is to be reconciled, to tame lust, to honour marriage bonds, to avoid reckless oaths and retaliation, to love your enemies, to give to those in need, to pray and fast, to store your treasure in heaven, to live in hope and not fear, to refrain from judging, to do unto others as you would have them do unto you, to live the words of the Lord who spoke these things. That is what makes peace. And the one who Incarnated peace, Emmanuel, called us to likewise incarnate peace by receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter. The prophet Isaiah said that peace would come through the giving of the Holy Spirit: "For the palace is forsaken, the populous city deserted; the hill and the watchtower will become dens forever, a joy of wild donkeys, a pasture of flocks; until the Spirit is poured upon us from on high, and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is deemed a forest. Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abide in the fruitful field. And the effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever. My people will abide in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places" (Isaiah 32:14-18). The apostle Paul also encourages us to be "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3). Three of the Advent candles are dedicated to fruits of the Spirit: love, joy and peace. And if we think of hope as a kind of patience or faithfulness, that would make four (Galatians 5:22). Peace, like the other virtues and gifts, are fruits of the Spirit. Perhaps if we thought of the Advent candles as having a practical theological relationship, we might say that to expect Christ's coming, to welcome Jesus into our lives now and in the hereafter, we live in hope and at peace with others in a spirit of joy while growing in love until Christ is fully born in us.

 To expect something means that something can happen. In fact, expectation builds peace. People are more likely to be aggressive when the future becomes a prison wall rather than an open road. God's grace is ever active in our world. God has never been absent. It is we who are often absent from God. The lectionary reading today teaches us something about expectation. It teaches us about preparing ourselves to receive God in our hearts and in our ways of living. John the Baptist says: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight" (Matthew 3:1-3); "Bear fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matthew 3:8); "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Matthew 3:11). *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.* John taught the people to repent and be baptized with a baptism of repentance. And later, on Pentecost, Peter told the crowds: "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are off, everyone" (Acts 2:38-39). This was the baptism to receive Jesus. In both cases we see a reconciliation happening. To receive peace we must repent—that means we must turn away from darkness and turn towards God. We must humble ourselves to the coming of Jesus, to the coming of the Holy Spirit into our lives. This is a radical message of hope. Peace in the kingdom of heaven is not some abstract concept. People can disagree about concepts and fight over them. Peace is not an ideological construct. People can disagree over ideological constructs and deconstruct them and deconstruct each other in the process. It is not a matter of economic statistics or historically defined circumstances. These can fluctuate, invite divisions, revisions, and confusion. Peace is a relationship; it is a relationship founded on personalism; more specifically, it is founded in the person of Jesus—the Son of God, the Son of Man, Emmanuel—God with us. Peace is thus salvation, as it comes from the Saviour. Preparing to receive Jesus is saying Yes to this coming, to this grace that is coming, to saying Yes to the One who brings all nations, peoples and voices together. It is saying yes to being persons and saying yes to the relationships of persons. It is recovery of our humanity in its fullest sense.

 To follow Jesus and to realize peace, we need to repent and make room for the Word of God. To make space for the Holy Spirit. To empty ourselves of self and welcome the peace that God would give us, to say Yes to God. One of the first people to say Yes to God in the Gospels was Mary. Rob des Cotes, our dear former pastor, wrote a beautiful meditation on Mary that I would like to share. It begins with the words Mary spoke to the angel at the annunciation in Luke 1:38: "Let it be unto me, according to Your will." The meditation goes on to say, "Mary said yes.  But God could've certainly bypassed her.  The Lord didn't really need anybody's consent to become a man.  Jesus could just as easily have come to earth, ex nihilo, living and dying as an adult on the cross thereby accomplishing everything our theology says was required for our salvation.  All this could have happened without Mary.  But God chose instead to enlist a young girl's 'yes.' It is part of the mystery of God's condescension that He sees our 'yes' as a prerequisite before He enters more deeply into our lives.  Many times in the Bible the Lord tells His servants beforehand what He is about to do.  It might seem as though they have no real choice but to accept the will of God. But it is also evident that God chooses to reveal Himself to those who, like Mary, are already disposed to obey Him…Paul says in Gal. 4:19 that he prays for the church as though in the pains of childbirth, 'until Christ is formed in you.'  As we consider the 'seed' of Jesus that grows within us to become Christ fully-formed, let us consider how our own continued 'yes' to God makes room for this seed to expand.  Let us see Mary's word not simply as a one-time statement, but more as a daily disposition.  And let us, like Mary, be prepared to say yes to all the God-ordained circumstances of our lives."

 Will saying yes and following Jesus make any difference? Will it bring any good to this life, to the fragmentation in our communities, to the breakdown of discourse and dialogue in our world? The historian R.A. Markus in the book *Christianity in the Roman World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974) shows the early Christians to have been both cultural and linguistic innovators as well as forerunners in popularizing the use of the codex, a technological improvement from which our modern book descends (26). They assisted in the preservation of classical learning, the ancestor of our humanities or liberal arts (128-129; 141), and their community was the vehicle for contact between cultures (143). In his book *The Early Church* (London: Penguin, 1967), the historian Henry Chadwick writes that Christianity answered the search for happiness—faith in Jesus brought happiness to people (55). Moreover, it improved society through its care for the impoverished, the imprisoned, for widows and orphans (56), and played a significant role in the manumission of slaves and prisoners of war (60). It was a faith that enabled its community to withstand severe persecutions, a faith that moved beyond mere survival into actual overcoming (287). At its time, the Christian Church was the instrument of the only possible unity among otherwise antagonistic kingdoms that arose in the wake of barbarian invasions, displacements and migrations (288), a cosmopolitan religion that reached out into each new tribe and language group which it contacted (248-249). It also ended cruel punishments and games, like gladiatorial combat. Other accomplishments followed: the first international banking system; the first agencies to ransom slaves and kidnapped peoples—the Mercedarians ransomed people with their own lives! Many of our ideas on social justice today derive in some way from Christian ethics. Christianity is one of the few religions that did not allow for certain kinds of people to be regarded as non-persons. Christianity has celebrated life and eternal life for two thousand years. It has given hope to billions, and continues to give hope today. The footprints of Christ have never faded from world history. And when you follow Jesus, you too leave footprints that affect the communities you live in. Like any story, our history has blemishes and moments of darkness; there is sin in our history—because we are sinners looking for redemption. Nevertheless, the Christian faith has traditionally upheld reason, mercy, hope for the future, community, reconciliation and most importantly—the sacredness and joy of living, the beauty of life itself. And if history is not convincing enough, let us look to the here and now. Look around you, look at who has been gathered under one roof. Women, men and children of different backgrounds, cultures, language groups, political leanings—all celebrating communion today, all coming here to share in a community that was founded by Jesus of Nazareth, someone who promised to come again and bring a completion to our peace, someone who is alive today and living in the hearts of all who believe.

 Life is hard and sometimes filled with strife, but I love life. I love all that life brings. All the mystery, all the unknowns, all the surprises. I love the people that life brings. If life has any purpose at all for us—it is relationships. Our relationships with things, our relationships with creation, our relationships with one another, our relationships with God. And these relationships thrive when there is peace; they tend to wither and die when peace is absent. And when relationships die, something inside of us dies as well. To repent is to say yes to relationships, to say yes to life and to the God who gives life, to say yes to real peace. As the French philosopher Michel Henry once said, "To be born is not to come into the world. To be born is to come into life." (*I Am the Truth. Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*). If you do not really know Jesus yet, then open your heart to Him and seek Him—learn from the Gospels who this wonderful Saviour is. If you believe in Christ and have not yet been baptized—then give yourself to Christ in baptism and follow Him. That is a sure way to bring inner peace to yourself and active peace to this world. If you have been a believer for a long time but feel that you have lost your way, then turn to God and let God heal you and bring you serenity and healing. And as a community, may we pray for peace and may we embody peace the way Jesus did every day. May we look forward in hope like John the Baptist; may we be able to say to God the words that Mary said: "Let it be unto me, according to Your will." Our expectation is part of our peace, and when we look forward to the coming of Jesus every day, into every corner of our lives—others will begin to see what hope looks like; and they will see what peace looks like as well.

 Come, Lord Jesus come. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Amen.