Sermon on Advent 1 Year A 2011

Is human history open or is it closed? Is there at the root of human choice and decision an illusion that things can and do change? Or is the truth that despite our choices and decisions there is too much stacked against us; that the gears of history are not reversible; either because all there is is the material world or because our freedom is insignificant, too small to matter?

The texts that have been traditionally assigned to Advent down through Church history boldly assert that human history is open that as the great poet Gerard Manley Hopkins put it “there lives the dearest freshness deep down things.”

That’s why it’s profoundly ironic that in recent time texts like our gospel reading have been read in a way that makes them seem like predictions of a future that’s already been decided; further, not only of a future that’s already been decided but something that must inevitably contain a whole lot of what is dark and terrible; that which is, in a thoroughly wrong way of using the word, apocalyptic.

Perhaps the pressure to read this way is understandable in a world that really seems to be stumbling along, always putting it’s foot in it; let’s see, does the political situation in our world serve as a good enough example? How about the growing disparity between the rich and poor or our deep unwillingness to face the reality of human involvement in environmental change.

All along the line it can appear as if descent into that which is worse than what was before is inevitable.

Then there is the reality of our own lives; however wonderful they may be, however successful they may be, there is always descent and decline. Truth be told most of us experience a lot of failure, a lot of mistakes, a lot of pain in our lives

Where is the freshness deep down things? Isn’t it actually all corroding rot?

Here is a good example of why we need the great Tradition for if even the Bible’s message can be interpreted under pressure as fated towards the bad, from where will the good news come?

Advent and the Church year as a whole is the necessary antidote: human history as an unfolding, a revealing, not of mechanistic fate, but of the truly personal where choice and decision actually matter.

Without denying the realities in our world and in our lives, indeed the Bible is concerned to actually amplify the seriousness of our and the world’s situation, we find time and time again, like in the great passage we read from Isaiah this morning that there is, just when things appear the worst a beautiful little three letter word, “yet,” “Yet, O Lord, you are our Father…”

The imagery in Isaiah of the heavens tearing and the mountains quaking is meant to evoke the giving of the law; not some horrible day of judgement but the giving of that which is supremely good.

As an apocalypse, which isn’t, despite current usage, about some horrible event that will come upon us because it’s been predicted but rather as the literal Greek meaning of the word suggests, an unveiling, a revealing of God’s action, God’s love in human history, a revealing that our choices matter and can make a true and lasting difference.

Of course, as Isaiah points out, even the revealing of that which is supremely good, led to fear, led to rebellion and sin amongst the people of Israel. The Israelites, in fear of God’s awesome presence, begged Aaron for some domesticated God; voila, the golden calf! What hope is there, again we ask, when even God’s good gifts can misused?

When God’s people have misrepresented God, using God for their own selfish ends; when God’s face is hidden and in the graphic imagery of Isaiah, even our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth which might mean either a toilet rag or a menstrual cloth, then surely the gears of history will simply grind goodness down; then the good and the beautiful are fanciful dreams and the pursuit of truth is only the rationalization of the powerful.

“Yet;” there it is, the divine will; the power of divine love; *yet* there is a way forward; there is an apocalypse; a revealing, a revealing that doesn’t consign the human heart to fear but opens it to the possibilities of a supreme love.

And so the Church traditionally never looked on the descent of culture or ill winds in economics or politics, or even tragedy in personal life as signs that God was giving up; but as *possibilities* for God’s love! As possibilities for genuine freedom and partnership between God and people!

And so in each of our texts today you’ll have noticed an emphasis on waiting: from Isaiah, “no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him;” from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, “you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ” and from our Gospel, with a slightly different emphasis, “keep awake.”

In each case, however, this waiting is not interpreted as standing in a line-up or sitting in a “waiting room,” where we try to stifle our boredom by looking at a three year old Reader’s Digest or texting on our smart phones

Rather in each case it’s an active anticipation or, even better, cooperation with God, a working with this “yet,” this hope that comes at the end of all our mistakes and foolishness, at the end of our disappointment: so in Isaiah we are encouraged to not only pray but to “gladly do right” with the accompanying promise that God will meet us

In Corinthians we note the strong call to exercise the spiritual gifts we’ve been given, it’s described there as a richness informing all our speech and knowledge, enriching our entire being.

Talk about something we need to hear when things are falling apart around us and maybe even within us.

And in our gospel, we’re encouraged to believe that the hour of revealing is like being put in charge of a large operation; we’ve got a job to do even as we actively anticipate God’s unveiling and help; this is not a passive fated reality but a participation in a partnership!

Someone has said, with exaggeration to make a point, that if you cut Christmas out of the Bible you lose 3 chapters; indeed the doctrine of Christ’s incarnation; God made a human being, doesn’t depend on it as we see in Mark’s gospel, probably the first gospel, which doesn’t have a birth story, that is, a Christmas story.

Christmas, as we know it only became a major feast in the Church under the influence of Francis of Assisi, something we have to thank him for but something that is also telling as to its importance.

But cut out Advent, and you lose half the first testament and half the New Testament; you lose the looking forward in hope, you lose prayer which is fundamentally about God’s “yet” in the middle of our mess “oh that you would tear the heavens and come down!”; you lose the understanding that God comes into the midst of our messiness and pain and works for good

The Christmas season can be difficult for many of us; it’s the sheer romance of the thing; it highlights everything that’s wrong with our lives; we don’t live in the middle of a Porsche commercial.

Life isn’t Christmas cozy: a box of chocolates and a shimmering glass of port as the fire crackles; that’s a moment; Life is Advent; it’s in Advent that God’s “yet” can begin to shimmer, so get out on the back porch, rake those leaves and stay awake, watch for the star in the east! Amen.