

PROTEST SPEECH
First Sunday in Advent

November 30th, 2014

Text

Isaiah 10:1-4; 11:1-5

Introduction

The season of Advent is a journey through time.

We look back some 2,000 years to the birth of Jesus; and we look forward to the ultimate fulfillment of his mission – the actualization of God’s kingdom here on Earth.

God’s realm of peace and justice was the goal of Jesus’ ministry.

It frames the Christmas story and formed both Jesus and his ministry.

The Christic mission did not, however, begin in Bethlehem. Its origins are as old as humankind.

The story of God’s kingdom is the story of God’s relationship with Earth’s children.

In the Beginning Was the Communication

The author of John’s Gospel spells it out for us. The Prologue to his Gospel begins:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

In Greek, the expression is “logos” & it has nothing to do with words in the dictionary.

“Logos” was a philosophical term. Literally translated, it means “Divine reason”.

But the logos was understood to be God’s mode of communicating with creation.

It was the mechanism through which God maintained order in the universe.

Whether God was creating a daisy billions of years ago or is speaking to person’s conscience here & now, the “logos” is the means through which God accomplishes his work.

Dr. Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, explains that John 1:1 is best translated as, *“In the beginning was the communication.”*

The “Word” that Jesus bore was not a philosophical abstraction.

It was God’s direct communication with humankind.

Jesus came with a message from God.

He WAS that message in human form.

So, if Christmas is a communication from God, what is it saying?

What was God telling the people 2, 000 years ago?

And what is God telling us today?

This Advent, we are going to find out exactly what God is trying to get through to us.

So – listen up!

Isaiah & the Prophets of Israel & Judah

All of our faith traditions include stories of conversations between God and humanity.

Some are fantastical; others closely resemble the quiet words God whispers in our own ears.

In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, the prophecies of ancient Israel represent some of the earliest records of Divine utterances. Holy men and women like Moses and Deborah, Jeremiah and Huldah listened closely to God’s small voice and relayed the messages they heard to their people.

Sometimes, their prophecies were immediately turned into action; other times, they fell on deaf ears.

Prophesying reached its peak during the 8th to the 6th centuries. During those turbulent years, there was widespread injustice and corruption domestically. External threats came from the regional superpowers – first Assyria & then Babylon. The nations of Israel and Judah were devastated both from within and without.

And during all these tumultuous decades, God kept speaking to the people. First one prophet, then another would cry out for social justice & warn of impending doom if changes weren't made.

Prophets spoke of God's anger and disgust. But they also constantly reminded the people of God's mercy and love.

It is during this period of history, that we first hear promises of a messiah. God would send a person to set Israel & Judah to rights. This Davidic ruler would establish justice, restore peace, and reconcile the relationship between the people and God.

It was a message of hope & a promise of renewal.

When prophets spoke of a messiah they were looking forward to the day when their nation & its people would get the chance to start over.

Foremost among the messianic prophecies are those found in the book of Isaiah. This compilation of prophetic utterances addressed the conquests of Israel and Judah, the injustices that led to the nations' downfall, and God's promises for future restoration.

The message that Jesus preached and practiced had its roots in the prophecies of Isaiah. It is a message of comfort and hope but it is also one of complaint and challenge.

Protest Speech

The passage we just read from Isaiah 10 gives us a glimpse into Jesus' views about injustice and oppression. Among the offenses that would bring about Judah's downfall, Isaiah lists oppressive laws, neglect of the poor, and the defrauding of widows and orphans.

Addressing the crooked law-makers and government officials, Isaiah cries out,
*“What will you do on the day of punishment? ...
To whom will you flee for help,
and where will you leave your wealth?”*

In other words, what good will your ill-gotten gains do when your country is overrun by Assyria?
Or, as Jesus would later say,
“What will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?” (Matt. 16:26)

Jesus, following in Isaiah's footsteps, came with a message of protest and complaint.
*“Stop oppressing the poor and the disadvantaged!
Start doing something to help those in need or you'll discover that your wealth and possessions don't count for diddly-squat!”*

In the Third World, pastors and theologians love these texts. They speak about God's preferential option for the poor and view the Crucifixion as Jesus' act of solidarity with those who suffer.

Here in the West, most of us feel confused or uncomfortable when we read radical speeches by Jesus or the Hebrew prophets. Both preachers and parishioners do their best to get round these harsh words.

We refer to the zero-sum economics of Jesus' time.

We point to *gazzillionaires* & reassure ourselves that we're not rich.

We suggest that God's kingdom of peace and justice is eschatological. That is, God doesn't expect it to happen until the end of time.

There is some truth to the economic explanations; and none of us here is a *gazzillionaire*.

But God's dream of a peaceable and just society has nothing to do with heaven.

God has longed for that world to come into existence since the first Neanderthal killed his brother in a jealous rage.

Would Jesus have ever told a hungry person, "don't worry, you'll be fed when the world comes to an end?"

Would he have insisted that all healings wait till the end of time?

Of course not!

Nor would Isaiah or Amos or Micah have said, "Don't fret: God will bring an end to corrupt politics and oppressive legal systems on Judgment Day."

"Until then it's OK to neglect the poor and swindle the down- and- out!"

The prophets of ancient Israel and the prophet of Galilee shared a common mission:

to bring justice and equality to all people as quickly as possible.

"The kingdom come," Jesus prayed.

And he meant it!

As he looked at the desperate poverty all around him; as he observed how women & foreigners were treated; as Roman tightened its grip on the Jews, Jesus cried out to God:

"Please God, let your realm of peace & justice come quickly!"

It's a prayer we repeat every Sunday & yet we think Jesus was kidding when he prayed it!

A Message of Hope

Condemning injustice was the first utterance from God that Jesus & the prophets were asked to relay.

They protested the corruption in the nation's leadership, they pointed out the problems of rapacious greed, they pilloried those who neglected the poor.

From Isaiah to Jesus, the people were told that God was seriously angry.

They used expressions like "woe unto you" a lot!

But neither Jesus nor the prophets before him stopped on an angry note.

They wanted their audiences to know that God was on this problem.

He was at work:

trying to bring devastating poverty to an end; agitating on behalf of the dispossessed; seeking to combat all forms of prejudice and oppression.

Isaiah saw clearly how God would make all this happen.

He would send someone – a descendent of the great king David – to institute a righteous government and relieve the suffering of those in need.

"God's Spirit will help him accomplish this," Isaiah proclaimed.

The Message translates Isaiah's words like this:

"He won't judge by appearances, won't decide on the basis of hearsay.

He'll judge the needy by what is right, render decisions on earth's poor with justice.

[He will] build righteousness and faithfulness in the land."

Notice: Isaiah doesn't say that God will sock it to the rich.

God's Promised One will simply do what is right and fair for all people.

Some will be blessed by that; others not so much!

Jesus took Isaiah's words to heart. They became the foundation of his ministry.

When Jesus stood up in his home synagogue to deliver his first sermon, he quoted a text from the prophet we know as Third Isaiah. (61:1-3)

He read the words and then he claimed them as his own sacred mission.

Jesus told the congregation,

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free."

Jesus told his listeners – and us – that he came to bring good news to the poor.

It was a message of hope for the desperate who heard him speak those words.

And it is still a message of hope for those in need.

Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was murdered for his work on behalf of victims of poverty and violence in El Salvador, wrote the following:

*The self-sufficient, the proud,
those who, because they have
everything, look down on others,
those who have no need
even of God – for them there
will be no Christmas.
Only the poor, the hungry,
those who need someone
to come on their behalf,
will have that someone.
That someone is God.
Emmanuel. God-with-us.*

Jesus came bearing God's communication to humankind.

The message was that God had not forgotten or abandoned the disadvantaged & dispossessed.

God was going to stay with them & work for them until their circumstances changed.

That was – and is - the primary purpose of Jesus' incarnation.

That was the good news of great joy that the angels proclaimed to the shepherds.

And in 1st Century Palestine shepherds were pretty low on the socio-economic scale.

But Jesus' message of hope for the poor does not mean that everyone else is excluded from Christmas blessings & joys.

We have the joy of knowing that God loves everyone – not only society's down & outs but us when we're at our most down or our most out with God.

And Christmas blesses us with the promise that whatever goes wrong in our own lives – illness or loss or money problems – God will be there for us.

Oscar Romero wrote that Christmas can't happen for those who have no needs – not even a need of God.

But, if you do have needs – if you are burdened with worries or sorrows or shame – then Christmas is precisely for you!

Christmas is God's promise to be there whenever & wherever her beloved children are in need.

Conclusion

Jesus was sent as a communication from God.

He came with a message of protest against injustice and oppression.

He came with the promise that God would be there for anyone, anywhere, who was in need.

Jesus was also sent with a challenge – and AS a challenge:

“what will you do to incarnate God's mercy and love?”

“How will you help God's kingdom come?”