

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT (GAUDETE SUNDAY)

This Sunday has traditionally been called “*gaudete*” (Latin for “rejoice”) Sunday, taken from the introductory verse (“introit,” given in the Sacramentary): “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice! The Lord is near” (Phil 4:4-5; see also the second reading). The presider wore rose vestments (this is still permitted, but not required) as a sign of rejoicing, “the Lord is near”. The rose was also a reminder that



Advent penance was half over. Since the penance of Advent is understood in a different light now, it is better not to emphasize this “almost over” aspect of Advent penance. Rather, the rejoicing characteristic of this Sunday might mark the turning point in Advent as a season of longing and waiting. During the first two weeks of Advent, our expectation and longing were directed toward Christ’s Second Coming. On this Sunday, we shift our attention now to Christ’s first coming as a Baby at Bethlehem; in other words, we specifically look to Christmas. But even this turning point marks more than simply a “birthday” celebration. We now look to the Christ who was born in Bethlehem long ago as One who is still among us. Christ is present in us and in his body, the Church. For this we “rejoice always”. (Joyce Ann Zimmerman *et al.* *Living Liturgy: Spirituality Celebration and Catechesis for Sundays and Solemnities: 2006*, p. 15)

Some personal thoughts on singing “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”:

I must confess to being a great lover of the hymn, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”. For many Christians, it is *the* Advent hymn *par excellence*, and I have always found its haunting Gregorian-chant melody to be a beautiful and prayerful lead-up to the joyful burst of music which will characterize Christmas, beginning with the Christmas Eve Masses. I have more than a dozen recordings of it in Latin and English, and it is, to me, one of the sounds that most evokes the Advent season. Rooted in the “O Antiphons” which characterize the Liturgy of the Hours (and Mass) during the last week of Advent, it is a beautiful tapestry of Scriptural images long associated with Jesus and His coming.

However, in recent years, my study of Judaism, and my work in Jewish-Christian relations, has made me somewhat uncomfortable with some parts of this hymn which I love so much. Its opening words—familiar to English-speaking Christians around the world—are: “O Come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear”. For years I sang those words with gusto. But today I ask myself what they say about the relationship of Christianity to Judaism, and of the way we speak, preach—and *sing*—about the Jewish people.

Certainly as Christians, we believe that the coming of Jesus, God’s Son, into our world 2000 years ago was the keystone of all of history, was an event of such magnitude and importance that it transformed humanity and has reoriented every moment since. For us as Christians, that is beyond question.

But what about those words: “Ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear”? They certainly seem to suggest that Judaism in the decades and centuries leading up to the birth of Jesus was a grim, sad and lacklustre kind of faith, living in mourning and weeping as they yearned for the eventual coming of God’s Son. It suggests almost as if Judaism before Jesus was profoundly lacking, was incomplete and could only find fulfillment and happiness with the birth of Christ. The Latin original is even more sharply-worded than the English: “...*Israel, qui gemit in exilio, privatus Dei Filio*”: “Israel, which sighs in its exile, deprived of the Son of God”.

So often in Christian history, we have chosen to exalt Jesus and His teachings by contrasting them with the Judaism into which He was born, suggesting that what came *before* Jesus was grey and bleak, rigid, legalistic and lifeless—to which Jesus provided a much-needed antidote, emphasizing love, compassion and heartfelt service of God. Do we really believe that the Jewish people of Jesus’ time were living lives of

quiet desperation, of sadness and mourning, yearning for the Son of God who alone could bring them happiness and completeness? This certainly seems to be the message of these plaintive lines that we sing each Advent.

As Christians—and especially as leaders in the Christian community—we need to think seriously about what our hymn-texts say about our belief, and whether they are truly in keeping with the contemporary teachings of our churches. And this is particularly important with regard to our Jewish friends, since much of the “dark side” of Christian persecution of Jews has been rooted precisely in the idea that they are “deprived of the Son of God,” that their religion is futile and pointless because it does not acknowledge Jesus as the God-sent Messiah. There is a long and sad history of pointing to the Jewish people as a people cursed to unhappiness until they recognize Christ—a people “spurned” and rejected by God for their failure to embrace Jesus as expected.

What image of Judaism—then and now—do we communicate in the words of hymns like this? And is it really what our respective churches have been teaching for the past 50 years—a half-century in which many Christian denominations have been stressing the *vitality* and *diversity* of Judaism in Jesus’ time, its vigour and passionate quest to understand and follow God’s Law? Contrary to centuries of Christian teaching, Judaism was *not* a moribund, grim faith at the time of Jesus, and this portrayal continues to foster a triumphalistic view of Christianity over Judaism which is both inaccurate historically, but also colours the way in which Christians *today* view Judaism and their Jewish neighbours.

There are those who will argue that the “Israel” being referred to in the hymn is actually the Christian community, which “mourns in lonely exile” until Christ’s Second Coming. Such a reading is, indeed, possible—but it is questionable whether this is uppermost in the minds of most Christians who hear and sing this hymn each Advent. For many, “Israel” automatically conjures up the Middle Eastern country of that name, or the Jewish people, ancient and modern, who have always spoken of themselves as “Israel,” even before the State of Israel was established in 1948. If the Church is the intended subject of these words, it might be best to re-shape the lyrics so that this is more obvious and less prone to misinterpretation. The traditional “Church as Israel” imagery (which is itself theologically troublesome) does not spring to mind for many contemporary Christian listeners.

We need to remember that the subtly negative portrayal of Judaism in “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” is rooted in the theology of another time and place—indeed, these lyrics were apparently composed in the ninth century! Judaism was widely viewed as a failed religion, with no reason for its continued existence, unless the Jews were prepared to turn to Jesus and convert (which sometimes happened, but often under intense political and social pressure). Those were very different times, guided by a very different theological stance toward Judaism than that which most churches would espouse today.

What is the appropriate response? I am not advocating that we should jettison “O Come, O Come Emmanuel,” whose words actually constitute one of the most beautiful Scriptural and poetic links between Christians and the Old Testament. But I think that we *do* need to ask ourselves whether some of our most treasured hymns may not, even unconsciously, communicate a message which disparages others and promotes negative views of them, at a time when we are working so hard to encourage respect, collaboration and love of all people—but especially of those whom Pope John Paul II called “our elder sisters and brothers, for whom we have a particular love”.

Two very good articles on this topic can be found online, at:

<http://www.icjs.org/clergy/albright.html#Anchor-3800>

http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/cjrelations/resources/education/OCE_commentary.htm

and the comments in Mary Boys’ excellent book, *Has God Only One Blessing? Judaism As a Source of Christian Self-Understanding*, pp. 269-70, and in her chapter “The Liturgy: A Call to Conversion”.

(See also the attached version of a suggested revision of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” by Dr. Philip Cunningham and Ken Meltz).

M. Eugene Boring and Fred Craddock, eds. *The People's New Testament Commentary*, p. 51:

To some extent, John's question may already be ours. The John of Matthew's story may speak for those who were once sure of their faith but now are not so sure, or for those who are impressed by Jesus' accomplishments but wonder if there is some clue in them to the ultimate meaning of things, or for those who are beginning to doubt whether the way of gentleness and nonretaliation can ever really "work" in a world where the Herods still have most of the power. Matthew does not consider the asking of such questions to close the door to faith.

On the other hand, John's questions may not be ours, so that if we ask ultimate questions at all, they may not take John's theological form, and Matthew's story of Jesus may want to teach us how to ask the question. His mode of asking, seeking and knocking (7:7) excludes any individualistic "me and Jesus" approach, and reshapes the Christological question to include Israel and history. To ask whether Jesus is "the one who is to come," i.e., the one in whom God has definitively revealed himself and acted for the world's salvation, is to ask what it is *all* about. Matthew's whole Gospel is his answer to John's question.

Mary H. Schertz, Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary; online at: <http://www.ambs.edu/news-and-publications/advent/advent3>

In answer to John's question, Jesus points not to the Sermon on the Mount, the calming of the storm or the calling of the disciples—all of which have happened since he left John in the wilderness. Instead he points John to observable events of his ministry—blind people seeing, lame people walking, lepers healed, deaf hearing, dead people raised, poor people living in new hope. In light of this answer, Jesus seems to perceive John's question from prison to be a concern for the practical justice aspect of his ministry. Perhaps there are parts of the Sermon on the Mount or the other activities of Jesus' ministry that made John wonder if Jesus were over spiritualizing the concept of the Kingdom of God. Although we cannot know exactly what is behind John's inquiry, it is interesting to note that Jesus does not seem to take amiss the implied criticism of the question. Rather he addresses it as a legitimate concern.

Father Jim Mazzone; online at: <http://members.aol.com/homilies/aadv3.html>

Who is Jesus for you? Perhaps we, like John, have an image of Jesus that is not exactly on the mark and perhaps that is why our spiritual lives may be stagnant or sluggish—or even nonexistent.

Jesus provides some answers to this question this week. Jesus heals. Jesus cleanses. Jesus brings back to life that which was dead. Jesus brings good news to those in desperation.

Rather than cowering in fear or shame to a Lord who judges, let us respond to Jesus who in our Gospel this weekend reminds us of who He truly is.

Let us put all that is hurting, stained, dead and impoverished in our lives in front of the Lord. Let nothing come in between us and the Lord. Shame and sin paralyzes. The love of Christ brings healing.

Marie-Noëlle Thabut, "Commentaires bibliques"; online at the Web site of the Catholic Bishops of France (www.cef.fr); my translation from the French:

There were two types of texts in the Scriptures announcing the Messiah: texts which spoke of his *works*, and texts which spoke of his *titles*. Regarding his titles, some of them spoke of him as a king, others as a prophet, others of a priest. Jesus does not cite any of the texts about the Messiah's titles; once again, He claims none of those titles for Himself.

On the other hand, He quotes extensively from several texts which spoke of the *works* of the Messiah: "The blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead return to life, and the Good News is proclaimed to the poor".

Jesus does not, therefore, reply to John the Baptist's question with a "yes" or "no". He quotes the prophecies which John the Baptist knew as well as everyone else, and He says: "Verify for yourself if this is truly what I am doing"—and what is meant, of course, is: "Yes, I truly *am* the Messiah, the Son of God. You are not mistaken".

There is a John who lives in all of us: we are disappointed in God. (Helmut Thielicke)

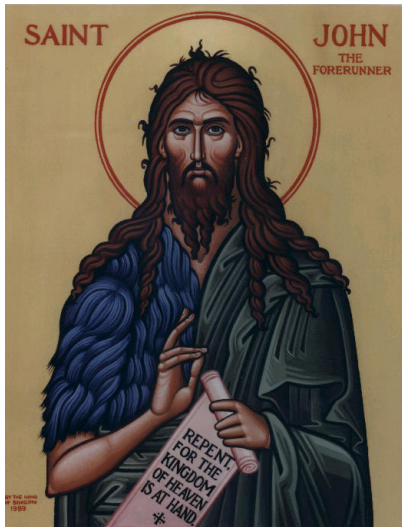
Few know blindness so profoundly as prisoners who once could see the whole world but now find the universe shrunk to the size of a cell. (Frederick Niedner, sermon, "Cell Mates")

We must accept finite disappointment, but we must never lose infinite hope.
(Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.)

The first great task for a messiah is to bring to an end the search for a messiah. (Fred Craddock)

**Tod O.L. Mundo, "Saturday Night Theologian"; online at:
www.progressivetheology.org**

When U.S. Treasury agents want to learn to identify counterfeit \$100 bills, they spend their time looking



at legitimate currency. They take \$100 bills and study them carefully, looking at them with magnifying glasses, finding the magnetic strips that are in the new bills, looking for the watermarks, checking the color of the ink, observing what happens when the bill is marked with a marker. There's only one true \$100 bill, all the rest are counterfeits. Why don't they bother studying the different types of counterfeits? Because they're so familiar with the real thing, they know it when they see it. John the Baptist was in prison, facing the end of his ministry as well as the end of his life. He had devoted himself to preaching a message of repentance, and he had had great success. He had told his followers to be on the lookout for one who would be greater than he was. He had baptized Jesus and had witnessed a miraculous event, as though God were speaking from a cloud. Surely Jesus was the long-awaited messiah. But now he wasn't so sure. Jesus' message was somewhat different from his, less fiery and more irenic, less prophetic and more didactic. His lifestyle was

different, too. Whereas John led a Spartan life in the wilderness, a latter-day Elijah, Jesus ate and drank—wine!--and he hobnobbed with tax collectors and other people of questionable character. It was even rumored that prostitutes were among his followers. Discouraged that the messiah had not yet made himself known, John sent his disciples to ask Jesus point blank, "Are you the messiah?" ... Jesus' response is poignant, because it provides John with a sense of accomplishment and closure to his ministry. The messiah he had announced had arrived, so his work was complete. John wondered whether Jesus was the messiah, and Jesus answered, in effect, "If you'll observe what I'm doing, you'll get your answer." Or, "You'll know it when you see it." Many in the world today are looking for the messiah, or a messenger from God, who has a message of hope in a troubled world. There are lots of people out there who are saying, "Look at me! Pick me! Follow my religion! Join my church!" ... Those who are seeking meaning in their lives need to see a church that is actually involved in direct ministry to the poor, the blind, the deaf, the lame, the oppressed, the refugees, the illegal immigrants. *Seekers don't always know exactly what they're seeking, but they will know it when they see it.*