

Advent 2

It is that musical time of year once again. There is nothing to compare with it. Although we know that Easter is the primary feast of the church year and Christmas is simply its pre-condition (the Lord had to be born in order to be resurrected), nevertheless the amount of hymns and carols surrounding Christmas far surpasses that which surround Easter. Perhaps the reason for this is the simple fact that we can celebrate a baby's birth without difficulty. We can see and hold a baby, but we cannot do that with a resurrected person. We have no idea what happens to us in the resurrection. Yes, we will be raised up. Yes, we will be transformed. But to describe that transformation is beyond our powers of imagination.

Our readings today are very musical. For those of us who are fans of Handel's Messiah, our first reading for today from Isaiah will make us hum because we will be hearing in our heads the beautiful melodies which Handel created to accompany Isaiah's words: "Comfort, comfort my people. Every valley shall be exalted. Here is your God."

Music can make us happy or sad. Today's music accompanying this first reading from Isaiah 40 should make us happy because it is so upbeat: "Comfort, give comfort to my people." I hope our president-elect attends church today and hears this reading from Isaiah. For he needs to say the same thing to our country today, People have to be told that all will be well. Their confidence has to be restored. Just as President Roosevelt told people that the only thing they had to fear was fear itself and made "Happy Days are Here Again" his theme song, so President Elect Obama must do something similar in order to restore our hope and confidence.

That is what the author of these words was doing for his fellow Jews who had been conquered by the Babylonians. He was speaking in the sixth century before our Lord. The super-power of the day, Babylonia, had destroyed Jerusalem and the temple, and deported many of the people to Babylon. Then, some thirty years later, this man (he is called Deutero-Isaiah or Second Isaiah because he was not the original Isaiah who lived in the 700s, so two hundred years earlier) raised his voice to give his fellow exiles the Good News: God is going to intervene once again on our behalf. The Babylonians will fall to the Persians, and the Persian king, Darius by name, will let us go home and rebuild our city and temple. So comfort, comfort to you. Every valley shall be filled,

every mountain and hill shall be made low. Go up onto a high mountain and cry out the Good News.

Good News. That is what the word Gospel means. Mark, the author of the first Gospel, reflecting on what had happened in Jesus of Nazareth, reached back to the words of Second-Isaiah and applied them to John the Baptist. He was the voice crying out in the desert. He was the one who made straight the way of the Lord. Thus Mark was saying that in John Baptist and in Jesus God has once again visited his people, this time in an unsurpassable way.

So often the image of a journey is used in our Scriptures. The Jews saw God's first intervention for them when they were called to leave Egypt. We call it the Exodus. Deutero-Isaiah talked about a new exodus, the return of the Jews to their promised land under Darius. Mark sees a third exodus in Jesus' coming, although we have to admit that this third exodus is not so much a physical journey, as the first two were, but a spiritual one. Jesus comes to lead people out of slavery to sin into the freedom of God's children. He comes to move people into his Father's Kingdom.

Each Advent we remind ourselves of this third journey. We believe that we are on the way to the Father's Kingdom. Or, to put it another way, we believe that the entire human race, indeed the world itself, is moving towards the Kingdom of God. Each of us makes his or her own personal journey to the Kingdom, but the church insists that this journey to the Kingdom is in the final analysis not about us as individuals but about the whole world, about the final destiny of the human race. But of course this world-encompassing journey is made up of individual journeys.

How are we doing on our individual journey? Vesting yesterday for a funeral Mass here for Leo Paul, Bishop Gelineau reflected on the fact that most of the people in the obituaries are in their eighties. Since he has just begun that decade, he reflected on the fact that he is on his last lap. I don't know what resolutions he has for himself, but he was clearly saying that he is aware that the end of his journey is approaching and that appropriate action should be taken.

Since the Kingdom of God is not a matter of eating or drinking—despite the fact that this is the most massive image of the kingdom in its fullness, the banquet of the Lord---but of justice and love, let us, and especially those of us who are far along in the journey,

make sure that our lives are marked by those virtues, love and justice. Let us do justice. Let us live justly. And we do that if we attempt to love God and our neighbor. And the best way to do that is to adopt the attitude which John the Baptist adopted. He put Christ ahead of himself. He made Jesus big and himself small. That must be our aim in life as well. The enemy is our selves. Not our good selves, but our selfish selves. So we might pray: Lord, help me to be just a bit less selfish in the way I live. Don't reveal all my shortcomings to me all at once. That would be too discouraging. Nevertheless, lead me to live a life which looks beyond my own personal interests. Then I will make my small contribution to the world's journey to You, to the Kingdom of Your Father.