

Advent 2.06

1. Look at all the history in today's readings. In the Gospel Luke makes sure that we know exactly where and when we are. It is the 15th year of the reign of the Roman emperor Tiberius Caesar, and in Judea Pontius Pilate is the Roman governor, and there are the local Jewish kings Herod and his brother Philip and the high priests Annas and Caiaphas. So Luke wants us to know we have our feet on the ground. We are in a particular time and a particular place. And into that concrete reality of space and time, into this particular moment in history steps this peculiar figure, a throwback to the prophets of old, John by name, the son of Zechariah, and his cry is: Prepare the way of the Lord!

2. This concreteness is also apparent in our other readings as well, though less obviously. The first reading from the Book of Baruch, a book which scholars believe dates from the first or second century before our Lord's time, is doing two things. It is looking at its own time, the time when the Jews were ruled by Greek kings, the descendants of the generals of Alexander's army, and hoping for liberation from these kings. But the book describes this hope in terms of the return of the Jews from exile in Babylon 400 years before this time. The author of this book now hopes that

something similar will happen in his day. So he makes the city of Jerusalem a person and imagines her putting off her clothes of mourning and putting on her clothes of celebration and running up on a high point to watch the exiles return to her from the east. And our psalm for today is the perfect text to put into lady's Jerusalem's mouth: "The Lord had done great things for us; we are filled with joy."

3. And Paul's letter to the Philippians, our second reading today, is also firmly rooted in the concrete here and now. After all, like all Paul's writing, it is a letter, and a letter is the work of people writing to each other at some particular moment in their lives. Here Paul is writing to what is sometimes described as his favorite community, his first community in Europe, in the city of Philippi, and he recalls the help they have given him, their partnership in the spreading of the Gospel he has shared with them from the first day until now. And he prays for them, that God who began a good work in them will continue to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus, that is, until the last day. Yes, it is about what Paul and this community have shared together in the preaching of the Gospel.

4. So all today's reading are concrete, historical work. So too is our faith which is reflected in these readings. Last Sunday I attempted

to describe the Mass to you as the action of the community. Today, in line with the emphasis of today's readings on a concrete time and space, we can see that the Mass, like our readings, is also historical in character. It is such first of all because it is the action of a community, and a community is a historical reality, a gathering of people at a particular time and in a particular place. So whether it is Tuesday morning at 9 in the basement or 4 pm in the upper church, the Mass is always the action of a particular community. And precisely because it is such, the Mass is always somewhat different because the people making up the community who celebrate it are always different. Think of the many different communities that have celebrated Mass in this building over the past 138 years.

5. But there is another dimension of the Mass which gives it an additional historical character. It is a memorial, a recalling of an event in the past. We realize that when we pay attention to the words of the Mass. "On the night before he died," we say, "Jesus took bread, blessed it and broke it." Yes, we are looking back to another historical event, the Lord's last supper with his disciples before he was arrested and murdered.

6. That supper cannot take place again in its own reality.

Nevertheless we believe that the persons who celebrated it, Jesus and his disciples, are alive. Moreover, we believe that the love which Jesus expressed then is still alive in his heart and that he still wishes to make this love present to us here and now by our celebrating this memorial meal. Hence his command: do this in memory of me. Therefore, in celebrating the Eucharist we establish a kind of triangle. Two corners of this triangle are historical and the third corner eternal. The first historical corner is the meal which took place two thousand years ago in Jerusalem. The second historical corner is our celebration today. And the third corner which links the other two together is the resurrected Lord in heaven who commanded us to do this in memory of him and whose love for us, once expressed in the sacrifice of his life, is still present in him. So we do three things when we celebrate the Eucharist: we look back to the Last Supper, we look up to the Lord in glory, and we fulfill his command to remember his sacrifice here and now.

7. And what should come out of this celebration? Since it is a reminder of what the Lord has done for us, his giving of his life for us, we should thank Him. And his gift to us asks for a gift from us. We are asked to give our lives to him. When we walk out of the

church, we have a mission. In accepting the Lord's gift of his body broken and blood poured out for us, we are now committed to do the same for him and for those with whom he identifies himself, our neighbors, especially those in need. Let us ask the Lord for the grace to do this a little more and a little better each day. Amen.