

Advent 3

Here is the front page of the Providence Journal for Friday, the 11th of December, 2009. At the very top there is a story about the former education coordinator at RI's trash agency who has been charged with falsifying mileage forms for phantom work appointments. A little below that there is a story about a judge who has ordered that a baby be returned to her mother. The Department of Children, Youth and Families, had taken the baby into its custody because it already had custody of this mother's three other children who had been removed because of issues of domestic violence. The judge insisted instead that they were removed because of a lack of electricity in the family's apartment. The Department also reported that the mother has a history of mental health problems and the father is a convicted felon. So the judge is taking a chance. Tune in later to see who was right, the judge or the DCYF. Then there is the story about a policeman from our own city who has been charged with beating a youth whom he and other officers had arrested. Not a pretty story.

But the lead story is about President Obama's speech in Oslo, Norway, where he received the Nobel Peace Prize. It is entitled "President defends war, urges peace." This peace prize has been awarded to people such as Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela,

Mother Teresa and the Dalai Lama. Mr. Obama drew some laughter from his audience when he acknowledged “the considerable controversy that your generous decision has generated.” Many people around the world had claimed that he had not done anything to deserve this prize, and he himself recognized the fact that his own accomplishments have been slight when compared to the work of these great giants of peace. There was also great irony in the fact that Mr. Obama was receiving a peace prize just days after he had made the decision to send more troops to Afghanistan where, as he admitted, some of them will kill and others be killed. But he defended his action by resorting to something familiar to us Catholics, the theory of the just war, that is, a war which is fought only because it is absolutely necessary to defend the innocent. In line with that theory he stressed the need to wage war according to rules of conduct which reject torture and the murder of innocents. And while willing to engage even enemies in dialogue, he recognized the fact that some enemies cannot be reasoned with. He said: “A nonviolent movement could not have halted Hitler’s armies..., and negotiations cannot convince al-Qaida’s leaders to lay down their arms.”

So a president receiving a medal for peace while defending his call to war, a mother seeking the return of her baby, a violent

policeman and a dishonest official—this is what the world offered us on Friday morning, December 11th.

But why talk about them here? Because I believe in the truth of what someone once said: A Christian should have the New Testament in one hand and the paper in the other. Or perhaps my memory is faulty. Perhaps the person said a Christian preacher, not just any Christian, but a Christian preacher in preparing his sermon should have the newspaper in one hand and the Scriptures in the other. If so, I am on solid ground.

We are about to celebrate the coming of the Word of God in the flesh. We believe that the Word of God, the Son, became human in the man Jesus. Once that happened there is no separating of the human and divine. They are tied up together. Our history is God's history, and so God's history is also our history. And the concrete result of this meshing is that we who follow Jesus must try to make our personal and public history as God-like as possible, or, if you wish, as Jesus-like as possible. And so we read the paper or listen to or watch the news and ask ourselves: Does this bit of reality really correspond to what it should be? And if not, what can we do to make it so? Sometimes there is a clear answer to this question, but at other times the answer is not clear. In the case of the violent

cop and the dishonest official, the answer seems clear. They should be punished. But in the case of the mother it is not yet clear whose judgment is better, that of the judge or that of the Department of Children, Youth and Families. As for President Obama, his call to war would have been anathema to Martin Luther King who believed in non –violent resistance---and overcame.

That is our world today. That is the world in which we attempt to live by the words of Christ. Look at today's second reading, taken from Paul's Letter to the Philippians. He tells his readers to rejoice, and we believe that what he said to them we can and ought to apply to ourselves. But, given our world, can we rejoice? Of course we can. After all, the papers of the world of Paul's day—if there had been such—would not have looked any different from our own today. There was corruption and violence; there were situations difficult to judge. Yet Paul told them to rejoice. Why? Because the Lord is near. But, you may say, we don't believe that. Paul was talking about the Lord's imminent return to bring in the Kingdom of God in all its fullness. But we today don't believe that this is going to happen anytime soon. But that does not mean that the Lord is not near. He has come among, and his having lived can never be denied. It is part of our history. And he is now risen, we believe. And so he is among us now even though we cannot see

him or feel him. It is this fact that allows us to rejoice even though we live in a sinful world. It is this fact that allows us not to be anxious even though we live in a sinful world. It is this fact that allows us to be at peace and to be kind to one another even though we live in a sinful world. Look at that wonderful sentence: “Your kindness should be known to all.” Yes, we can be kind and at peace and free of anxiety because the Lord is near us, present to us, leaning over our shoulder as we read the paper and ask ourselves how we can bring peace and kindness to our broken world.

Brothers and Sisters: let us grow in our awareness of the Lord’s presence among us: in his words, in the bread of the Eucharist, in our lives and the lives of all people in our sinful world.