

eLectionary Readings Discussion for Sunday, December 13, 2009

A Ministry of Christ the Redeemer Church, San Marcos, Texas
Third Sunday of Advent 2009

A Canticle of JOY

This discussion is the opinion of Bert Cobb and is not necessarily the opinion of anyone else. Do not interpret these reflections to mean anything other than what Bert Cobb thinks and feels. They are for the exhortation, encouragement, and edification of the Saints and may be used freely for that purpose.

The Lectionary Readings for the week:

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Canticle 9

Philippians 4:4-7

Luke 3:7-18

Yes, Bill, this week, we have another quotation from “Canticles”. Since my stated purpose for writing these discussions is to make us think, I will digress and discuss Canticles. A “canticle” is a “song” therefore, the book, Canticle of Canticles should also be interpreted as “Song of Songs” and is arguably attributed to King Solomon. A “cantor” is a figure in Judaism who “sings” the scriptures. Words and word origins fascinate me. Words are actually “ideograms” that describe some concept so that “learning to read” is nothing more than learning the “code” that words represent. Words are “pictures” that stand for an idea or concept: CAT “stands for” that furry animal that spits up hair balls and stinks up the litter box. What comes to your mind when you hear: “Christ”, “Emmanuel”, “Savior”, “Son of God”, “and Christmas”? It all depends on your “experience” with each of these “word pictures”, doesn’t it? Christmas is not always “happy” or “joyous” for everyone as I learned through my many years of working the emergency departments during the holidays. The “Canticle” for this week is “taken” from Isaiah and “collected” as a “song” in the Book of Common Prayer. The Bible contains LOTS of “canticles” or “songs of praise” which could be collected in one treatise. FOR WORSHIP PURPOSES, the collators of the Book of Common Prayer have collected various “Songs of Prayer and Worship” into one place. Some are taken from “Holy Scripture” and others arise from varied sources. To further study this topic, one can do a Google search of ***“Canticles in the Book of Common Prayer”*** and it will elucidate your questions far more eloquently than I. Now, back to the story...

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Sing ALOUD, O daughter Zion;

SHOUT, O Israel!

Rejoice and exult with all your heart,

O daughter Jerusalem!

***The LORD has taken away the judgments against you,
he has turned away your enemies.
The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst;
you shall fear disaster no more.
On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:
Do not fear, O Zion;
do not let your hands grow weak.
The LORD, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory;
he will rejoice over you with gladness,
he will renew you in his love;
he will exult over you with LOUD singing
as on a day of festival.
I will remove disaster from you,
so that you will not bear reproach for it.
I will deal with all your oppressors
at that time.
And I will save the lame
and gather the outcast,
and I will change their shame into praise
and renown in all the earth.
At that time I will bring you home,
at the time when I gather you;
for I will make you renowned and praised
among all the peoples of the earth,
when I restore your fortunes
before your eyes, says the LORD.***

Should our “worship services” be quiet as a tomb or “respectfully loud”, filled with JOY? It all depends on whether one’s volume is derived from JOY or “showing off” by being “loud”. Can one be worshipful and still be “loud”? Nothing in scripture suggests that we are more “worshipful” when we are silent than when we are jubilantly “loud” (laud?). What is the purpose of our concern for the decibel levels of our worship? Is it because we have been “raised” to be “quiet in church”? Is it so we can hear the “preacher” endlessly drone on and on about how “bad” we all are? Does God “hear” the silent prayer as “efficiently” as the shout of JOY? Running for office has taught me that “the louder the argument, the poorer the logic of the arguer.” Ultimately, it boils down to the “attitude”, the “mind set” of the worshipper. God wants our honesty and requires an “open relationship with each of us”. When we are angry, we shout. When we are “joyous”, we shout with glee. Do we not understand that God can “tell the difference” between our emotions? God can “tell” when we are not sincere in our JOY or our praise. God, like any earthly parent, loves to hear our “voices” in JOY, PRAISE or WORSHIP regardless of the volume. It reminds me of the children’s song, “If you’re HAPPY and you KNOW it, clap your hands, etc. IF you’re happy and you know then, your FACE will SURELY SHOW IT.” True

emotion shows. True gratitude shows in our SHOUTS, our TEARS and our PRAISE. "JOY to the world, the Lord is COME." Now, to more serious issues: some have been critical that some are not totally quiet during communion. It all depends on the attitude of the person during communion. To me, Communion has always been a time of "mixed emotions". We are bidden to the table to "eat, drink AND remember". I am sad when I think of the suffering of our Lord and Savior who willingly gave himself as a sacrifice for MY SINS but, when I realize that "Jesus paid it all", I want to SHOUT with JOY. IF I focus ONLY on the suffering, sadness is appropriate. IF I focus on the GIFT of Jesus and his RESURRECTION to give me HOPE of eternal life, then, JOY is appropriate. Once again, we are torn by our emotions if we are fully engaged in "eating, drinking AND remembering". Jesus came to earth to CHANGE OUR ATTITUDES, to SAVE us and to give us the GIFT OF JOY. Only by being fully engaged in the remembrance of communion can we sing, "**JOY to the world, the LORD is come...**"

Canticle 9

The **First** Song of Isaiah *Ecce Deus*

Isaiah 12:2-6

Surely, it is God who saves me; *

I will trust in him and not be afraid.

For the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense, *
and he will be my Savior.

Therefore you shall draw water with rejoicing *
from the springs of salvation.

And on that day you shall say, *

Give thanks to the Lord and call upon his Name;

Make his deeds known among the peoples; *

see that they remember that his Name is exalted.

Sing the praises of the Lord, for he has done great things, *
and this is known in all the world.

Cry aloud, inhabitants of Zion, ring out your JOY, *

for the great one in the midst of you is the Holy One of Israel.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit: *

as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. Amen.

IF my wife and I had been blessed to have a daughter, I would have wanted to name her either JOY or GRACE because those two words describe how I feel about ALL of God's wondrous blessings in my life. This passage from Isaiah describes that state of "JOY" that should overcome the faithful at the "coming" (advent) of the Lord. IF we can get it through our thick skulls and hearts that the Lord comes, at one time or another, afresh into OUR lives, then, and only then, can we truly be GRATEFUL and JOYOUS for the GRACE that God extends toward each of us. It gives me great JOY that, at least once a year, the secular

world THINKS about Jesus. IF I focus on the JOY of Christ's birth, I don't have time to be angry or resentful of the commercialization of "Christmas". I still say Merry Christmas to everyone. If they are offended, so be it. I am so JOYFUL that I don't think they are offended at my JOY. If they are, they are in that host of folks who are "joy-stealers" and I feel sad for them. God bless them in their lack of JOY. CHRIST CAME TO EARTH FOR ME. CHRIST CAME TO EARTH FOR YOU. Be joyous in singing: "**JOY to the world, the LORD is COME. Let earth receive her KING.**" Hear the mystery of the faith: Christ is coming. Christ came and Christ WILL COME again. He left his SPIRIT as a place-holder to remind us of his "place in line in our lives". The presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives is best demonstrated by our FAITH, our LOVE and our JOY. "**JOY to the world, the Lord is come...**"

Philippians 4:4-7

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Sometimes, it takes work to find something about which to "rejoice". I like to say "You can't RE-JOICE unless you first JOICE." What does "joice" mean? "Joice" is the state of being joyful, filled with JOY. The problem is that many of us don't start by "joicing" so it is impossible for us to "re-joice". What gives you JOY? Is it your profession, your hobby, your church, your family, your friends, your spouse? If all of these give you JOY, you are most blessed in life and have good reason to "joice" and "re-joice" every time you think of the blessing they bring to your life. We should learn the lesson of Job: being grateful and rejoicing are choices that each makes, a change of ATTITUDE. If we miss the "gift" that God gave the world: His only-begotten son, the babe, Jesus, then, we miss the JOY of Advent and Christmas. Jesus is the "gift" that none of us "deserved". It was the GRACE of God to send His SON to offer us a means of salvation. Jesus is truly "the gift that keeps on giving". A "gift" is not a "gift" unless it is RECEIVED and acknowledged. This Advent Season, if we don't have a job, the perfect gifts, the perfect family, the perfect spouse, the perfect children, the perfect attitude or whatever, there is still time to change our attitude to one of JOY because of the "presence of our LORD" that we celebrate at Christmastide. If God's perfect GIFT does not bring a smile to your face and JOY to your heart, then, we miss the GIFT of Jesus and have little reason to "joice" and none whatsoever for "re-joicing". Think about something in life that brings us joy, write it down and DWELL on it. Dwelling on what gives us JOY will preclude all the other things that "steal our JOY". "Joy-stealers" are everywhere. Don't allow anyone to steal your JOY. Talk to God about it and let it go. This was Paul's advice to the church at Philippi: "**Do not WORRY about ANYTHING, but in EVERYTHING by PRAYER and SUPPLICATION with THANKSGIVING let your REQUESTS be**

made known to GOD. AND the PEACE OF GOD, which surpasses all understanding, will GUARD your HEARTS and MINDS in CHRIST JESUS.”

Only by giving up “self” to God can we fully appreciate and understand the JOY of Christmas. Christmas is not about me or you. Christmas is about the JOY of the coming of JESUS into our world. CELEBRATE JESUS. ***“JOY to the world, the LORD is COME.”***

Luke 3:7-18

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

John was living in the Judean desert and people left their homes and businesses to trek to where he was preaching and baptizing. (And we can't get people to come to church in an air-conditioned building with indoor plumbing?) Some came looking for healing, some came for hope and some came just because they were curious. Among the crowds who sought him out were such unscrupulous characters as tax collectors and soldiers. John's baptism was for repentance and the forgiveness of sins. EVERYONE in the crowd was in need of both, as are we. John's mission was to "prepare the way" for the Lord's ministry of salvation to these same people. I find it "interesting" that in response to the

charge of John to be “bearing fruit”, each asked “What then should we DO?” To each person who asked, John proposed a TASK to be performed as part of repentance and forgiveness. We practice “cheap forgiveness” in today’s world. Perhaps this is the reason our “forgiveness” of each other is so vapid and shallow? Only with Jesus is forgiveness “free”. John asked each person to perform some deed of contrition that would benefit those over who they had control or power. How would this work in our world? John was teaching these people that “forgiveness” has a price and that the difference between his baptism and the baptism of Jesus was that JESUS PAID THE PRICE for OUR FORGIVENESS. What is the ultimate “difference” between John’s baptism and the baptism of Jesus? The difference is plain and simple: the “baptism” (you pick the time and form) of Jesus gives complete forgiveness and the “gift” of the Holy Spirit to plead our case for sins we commit AFTER our “baptism” (you pick the time and form). IF that does not give you JOY, I am wasting my time and my words. If we have God’s Spirit, we will show it by bearing “fruit” as a reflection of the indwelling Holy Spirit. If we do not have the Spirit, then, perhaps we did not “change” despite the “time or form of baptism” we practiced and we cannot experience the JOY of salvation as Christ intended. “Do not quench the Spirit.” This “gift” of Jesus to SAVE us is THE REASON for the SEASON. If you understand this act of God’s love fully realized in the birth of Jesus the baby, then “your face will surely show it”. Be JOYFUL and SHOW IT. Our actions to bless others are not to obtain forgiveness; our acts are to show our JOY of having already been forgiven. One might say that, only the forgiven can truly give forgiveness to others because we understand the JOY of being forgiven. Forgive someone. You will bless them and be blessed. Bless someone by some gift of kindness and it will give JOY back to our Father, the giver of all GOOD and PERFECT gifts. ***“JOY to the world, the LORD IS COME. Let earth RECEIVE her KING. Let every heart prepare Him room and Heaven and Nature sing.”***