

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of St. Thomas More, NYC December 8, 2019
Advent 2nd Sunday of Year A Is 11:1-10; Rom 15:4-9; Mt 3:1-12

In a work known as "The Peaceable Kingdom, the Quaker minister and painter, Edward Hicks, painted the scene depicted in today's first reading of the wolf dwelling with the lamb, etc. no less than 62 times. That's at least how many copies exist today. It seems as if he was always trying to get the scene just right. That might be the theme we might reflect on today--how do we get right the image Isaiah presents to us today, one wherein those who are usually at odds with each other, wherein one is predator and the other prey, how is that message translated into our society where rivalry, revenge, competition and control are the order of the day, where a pattern of "us" against "them" arises in so many different contexts. Isaiah depicts a blurring, a blending, a bringing together of what we might think of as irreconcilable opposites, and in the resultant mix, new arrangements, new patterns, new harmonies are achieved. So, St. Paul writes to the community of Christians in Rome, which being then the center of the Mediterranean world, was undoubtedly a hodge-podge of all different kinds of peoples. Paul writes, urging them to let that hope become a reality, "May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to think in harmony with one another...Welcome one another, then, as Christ welcomed you." The church is to be the place where the prophecy of Isaiah is to be most clearly lived out.

Before that Biblical promise has the chance of becoming a possibility, intervening between the old and the new, is the figure of John the Baptist. John arrives on the scene clothed in a garment "made of camel's hair," and "a leather belt around his waist." It is more than a distinctive fashion choice. John is wearing the same kind of clothing that the prophet Elijah wore centuries before. Elijah was most noted for confronting the king of Israel for worshipping foreign gods. Today we would say that Elijah "spoke truth to power." John would do the very same when he confronted King Herod for marrying his brother's wife, a violation of Jewish law. And, for that John would be executed.

John's own biography is significant. As we read in St. Luke's gospel, John's father was a priest in the Temple in Jerusalem. We might call John a "child of privilege." Yet, John abandons all that and comes down to the Jordan, the river Jews had crossed centuries before when first they entered the Promised Land. He tells them forget about the Temple, the place where pious Jews used to go to have their sins forgiven, and instead to "wade in the waters," as the old spiritual phrases it, and be cleansed of their sins. For John the Temple was corrupt, a cesspool. It had become a sort of business where people could sacrifice an animal, convinced that now they were right with God,

and then go on their way without any real change of heart or behavior. John is calling for a whole new attitude that would show itself in a new approach to life, a way of life distinguished by good deeds. All this was to get ready for the One who was to come after, who was even greater than John.

Still, the contrast between the style and ministry of John was so stark that we might wonder if the disciples of John were not just a bit quizzical, even disappointed, in the way Jesus turned out. After all Jesus did not preach with the same ferocity as did John. John speaks of "the axe being laid to the root of the tree," with "every tree that is not fruitful, to be cut down and thrown into the fire." Jesus instead tells the parable of the gardener who asks the owner of the field to give the barren tree a chance of one more year to bear fruit. John announces that the coming Messiah "will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." Jesus tells the parable of the wheat and the weeds growing together. His disciples are to refrain from passing judgment on who are the "true believers," and who not. They are told not to make those neat distinctions between "us" and "them" that serve to make life simple, because life is never so simple; it will always be messy.

Although John distanced himself both literally and figuratively from the Temple, and although he looked to the future, his message still embodied a way of think that was too lodged in the past. John seems to represent an approach to religion, adopted by the Hebrews, and others as well, wherein a kind of black-and-white grid is imposed on life to distinguish good from evil, friend from foe, and sacred from profane. For those who accept this way of looking at life, a certain sense of security is provided in believing that everything and everyone has its proper place, and more importantly, should be kept in its proper place. As a consequence, divine sanction is given to social arrangements that are merely the creation of powerful groups within that society, most often for the purpose of maintaining their own vested interests, at the expense of others. So pervasive was this evil that Jesus criticized the religious leaders of His day, "You teach as dogmas mere human precepts." Theirs was an approach to life that included everything from food to sex, to work, to family life, to political life—not much was left out. Again, an attempt to make life neat and orderly, to keep at bay the chaos of human existence. It would be nice if life could be so simple.

Because we should not judge by appearances, as Isaiah reminds us, because things are not always as they appear to be, the gospel would remind us that many of the handy distinctions we've come up with to decide what is "kosher" and what not, that we use to direct our lives, may play the very same role as they did for the people in the time of Jesus. They just enable us to stick with the same tired, worn out

patterns of the past to avoid the risk of engaging the world in a new way. We absolve ourselves from ever having to learn anything new; we think we have it all figured out. As a result, the grid of those black-and-white distinctions we impose on life to make things simpler, those very distinctions of human, not divine manufacture, may prevent us from seeing how seeming irreconcilable opposites can indeed be fitted together to provide a fuller, a richer picture of life.

We profess to believe in a God who is Human, a King who is poor, a Teacher who comes in the form of a child. Jesus is the Lord of paradox Who would enlarge our imaginations to dream all sorts of possibilities, because things are not always as they appear to be. At Christmas we will celebrate God invading the messiness of human life and taking upon Godself all its limitations, all its contradictions, all its loose ends. If it be true that a tolerance for ambiguity is the necessary condition for any kind of creativity, then our willingness to abandon neat distinctions and live with the edges blurred will help us to recognize and live out the new vision of life Jesus is offering to us. Let us pray that this Christmas we will be able to see with the eyes of a faith renewed, that joyfully we can engage life with all its complexity, ambiguity, richness and wonder.