

“Christian Virtue as the Formula for Peace and the Path to Joy in God’s Presence”
Homily for the 1st Sunday of Advent (Year “A”)
December 1, 2019; St. Mary’s Cathedral

Introduction

For those of you who have taken a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, you know what a transformative experience it can be for making your faith come alive. Although it has been very many years for me since I did that, I still remember well the pilgrimage that I took when I was a young priest, and I also remember our pilgrimage guide, an accomplished Scripture scholar and Jesuit priest whom I knew well.

There is one moment of the pilgrimage that still stands out clearly in my memory. We were standing outside the old city of Jerusalem, and Fr. Makowski pointed out to us the ramps that were the entrances to the city leading up to the Temple in ancient Jerusalem, and the ramps that were the exits leading back out. Three ramps were the entrances going up, and two served as the exits leading back out. He explained that this was the case because in the Jewish Biblical mindset one always goes up to the house of the Lord with great joy and eagerness and so one wants to approach quickly, whereas it is with a heavy heart that one has to leave it and return to the world.

I always think of this scene every time I hear or read Psalm 122, which we sang for our Responsorial Psalm at this Mass: “Let us go rejoicing to the house of the Lord.”

Advice from St. Paul

The season of Advent is something like this. It is a joyful anticipation of being in the Lord’s presence, always being on the lookout for Him, and always being ready to receive Him. It is good that the Church gives us this season of Advent each year to reflect on this, and to drive home the point as to what this really means practically, concretely, in our everyday lives.

In the Gospel for today’s Mass Jesus speaks about the coming of the Son of Man. We usually think of this as at the end of time, when he will return to judge the living and the dead. And while this is certainly the case, it is not limited to this. Consistently Jesus teaches us to be alert, to be aware, to read the signs of the times. As he points out in this Gospel

passage, the failure to do this was precisely the problem of the people at the time of Noah: they were going about their day-to-day lives, very merrily, but completely oblivious to an imminent disaster. And so, when that disaster hit, they were washed away in it. What does that mean for us today?

We can take some very pointed and, perhaps, discomfoting advice from St. Paul in his letter to the Romans. He is contrasting here the two ages: the age of this world, and the age yet to come, in which the Christians should already be living. This is the contrast between being asleep and being awake, that is, being alert, seeing what is happening and not being swept up into the disaster; the contrast between night and day, darkness and light. And so he urges us to “put on the armor of light,” by which he means virtue, in order to resist the vices of the age.

Now, if we look at this list of vices St. Paul names here, it certainly seems that not much has changed between then and now: orgies and drunkenness, which is carousing and revelry and unrestrained self-indulgence of every kind. Sound familiar? Perhaps even more familiar is what he says about rivalry and jealousy: some people who always try to get ahead of others by destroying them. This is the attitude that stops at nothing to dominate and annihilate those who disagree (or whom one finds disagreeable), including lies, calumny, and orchestrated attacks based on distortions or pure fabrications of another’s mistakes. No room for love or forgiveness there, not even room for peaceful coexistence.

The Sin of the 21st Century

Perhaps the timeliest of all, though, is what St. Paul says about promiscuity and lust. I would like to explore for a moment the meaning of this word “lust,” which in the original Greek is *aselgeia*. *Aselgeia* means, yes, “lust” in the sense of sensuality and indecency, but also something more than that. It carries with it the sense of shamelessness. One Scripture scholar (William Barclay) describes it this way:

Aselgeia is one of the ugliest words in the Greek language. It does not describe only immorality; it describes the [one] who is lost to shame. Most people seek to conceal their evil deeds, but the [one] in whose heart there is lust is long past that. [Such a one] does not care who sees him; he does not

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care how much of a public exhibition he makes of himself; he does not care what people think of him. Lust is the quality of the [one] who dares publicly to do the things which are unbecoming for any [one] to do.

Does this not describe the world in which we are living today? The culture in which we live celebrates taking pride in what is shameful; shameful acts of sensuality and indecency are displayed on our streets, are broadcasted on television and theater screens, and are even taught to children in school.

In the middle of the 20th century, Pope Pius XII famously identified the sin of the 20th century as the loss of the sense of sin. Now, close to one-quarter of the way into this current century, it has become evident that the sin of the 21st century is that of sanctioning sin as a good and a social norm, and punishing anyone who would dare live a virtuous life in contradiction to it. The classic virtues that are the hallmark of the Christian life – humility, purity, forgiveness, and so forth – are seen as archaic and passé, the strictures of an oppressive old moral code long ago left on the trash heap of history. But what has the rejection of these virtues, and the punishment of those who champion them, produced? The evidence is abundant all around us: fear, poverty, violence, family breakdown, domestic violence, predatory behavior upon the vulnerable. The list goes on and on.

The Path to Peace

How we long for the vision of Isaiah to be a reality: “They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; one nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war again.” We long for peace, and this is a theme that rises to prominence especially at this time of the year: during Advent we prepare for the coming of Christ, the Prince of peace, and we celebrate his coming at Christmas; we pray for peace and renew ourselves in hope that peace can be realized in the New Year. What, though, is the formula for that peace?

The formula has been given to us by our Lord Jesus Christ: it is the path of virtue. Vice destroys a society and the individual, because it inevitably means corruption. It is virtue that leads to flourishing and brings about peace, and *all* of the virtues together, not only some that one may like and live by, while rejecting the others that seem less appealing

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or unpleasant. Isaiah, in fact, invites God’s people to pursue the path that leads to peace immediately after this prophecy that strikes so deeply in the human heart: “O house of Jacob, come, let us *walk in the light of the LORD.*”

Walking in the light of the Lord. Or as St. Paul would phrase it, “put on the amour of light.” “Put on,” in St. Paul’s writings, is a reference to baptism, as he says in Galatians: “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (3:27). Putting on Christ, that is, clothing ourselves with Christ, means nothing more and nothing less than living out the meaning of our baptism. Therefore, we must take our Lord’s warning, and that of St. Paul, seriously; we must not dupe ourselves and foolishly accommodate ourselves to the present age, shameless as it is in its exaltation of vice and enshrinement of sin as the social norm to which all must conform or be punished. For, if we do this, not only will we be swept away in disaster, but we will fail in what Pope Francis constantly teaches us about being – as he is so fond of saying – “missionary disciples”: we will fail to bear witness to the Good News, to the better way, doing so above all by a life of exemplary Christian virtue. This is what it means to be an *intentional* missionary disciple, a Christian who is serious and faithful in living out the meaning of his or her baptism.

Conclusion

And no, this is not an oppressive, antiquated moral code. Quite the contrary: it is the only way we can really “go rejoicing to the house of the Lord.” The “house of the Lord” is where the Lord is present, both the church as a building (His Real Presence in the Blessed Sacrament, preserved in the tabernacle) and the Church as a people (the Body of Christ). But joy in the Lord’s presence goes beyond the pleasure that comes from the company of family, friends and fellow believers, as great as that is. These are necessary means to the end of being truly happy with God, for when you really love someone, nothing makes you happier than to be in the presence of, and to serve, the one you love.

This is the deep and abiding happiness for which God designed us and that He wants for us. Do you truly love God? If so, you will show it by the light of a virtuous life, and you will find your true joy in being in His presence and serving Him well.