

“Making Room for the God Who Sets Us Free” Homily for Christmas, Mass During the Day (2020)

Introduction

The four weeks of Advent we have just traversed find their fulfillment tonight. There is much we do throughout Advent to prepare ourselves, especially liturgically. That includes not only the Mass, but also the Liturgy of the Hours, the collections of psalms, Scripture readings and prayers that clerics and vowed religious promise to pray at different hours during the day. One of those hours, the Office of Readings, contains a longer Scripture reading (in addition to a longer reading from one of the Fathers of the Church), and during the season of Advent those of us who pray it are treated to hearing from the prophet Isaiah, as he was so forthright in prophesying the coming of the Messiah.

The other morning, before I prayed that hour in the Liturgy of the Hours, I was at breakfast reading the newspaper, and came across an opinion piece in which the author reflected on the distresses of this year – the coronavirus pandemic being only one of them. At one point in narrating the litany of crises, the author wrote: “In August, Hurricane Isaias was followed by a tornado, and it was difficult not to think of the God of the Old Testament, the vengeful, petty one who gambled with Satan and tested Job.” How ironic, the name of the hurricane she mentions. Because right after that I went upstairs to pray the Office of Readings, and found this opening line from Isaiah: “Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you. See, upon the palms of my hands I have written your name.”

Sure doesn't sound like a vengeful God to me.

The Face of God

This idea of two different Gods, one of the Old Testament and the other of the New – or, at least, two different faces of God, the Old Testament face and the New Testament face – has been around a long time. It waxes and wanes. The idea is that the Old Testament God is vengeful and judging, while the New is loving and forgiving. It's a rather naïve and simplistic way of understanding God, really (and so I was surprised to see this from an associate professor of philosophy at a reputable university, as is the case with the author of that opinion piece).

In point of fact, God's multi-faceted attributes are woven all throughout Scripture: He is judge, but He is also lover; He holds accountable, but He also forgives; He punishes wrongdoing, but He also comes to the rescue of His servants.

But who, really, is God? Tonight we have the answer. St. John tells us in the Gospel reading for this Christmas Mass During the Day: “And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” You see, it was not enough for God to communicate to us through the written word, nor even through the spoken word proclaimed by prophets and preached by His anointed ones. No, His Word had to become flesh, take on a human body to manifest in the flesh His self-revelation. He became visible to us.

Today is the day God fulfills the plan He had been working for very many centuries throughout the history of His people Israel: a plan of salvation, a plan to deliver His faithful servants from the oppression of sin and death once and for all. That is His final and definitive communication to us, the Word that takes flesh: a Word of forgiveness and salvation.

The Liberating God

And to make the point, just think about the world of His Chosen People when He chose to become one of us: they were suffering under the oppression of Roman occupation. It is perhaps easy for us to romanticize the era, living as we do two millennia later, but the Romans were brutal conquerors. The practice of crucifixion alone makes that clear. And such oppression is not unknown in the history of this people; indeed, their entire history seems to be a saga of oppression and then liberation by their saving God.

The prophets were unrelenting in serving as the conscience of the people, rebuking them for their infidelities to the Covenant, and warning of devastation if they persisted. But they are also persistent in their hope. We heard that, once again from Isaiah, in our first reading: “For the LORD comforts his people, he redeems Jerusalem. The LORD has bared his holy arm in the sight of all the nations; all the ends of the earth will behold the salvation of our God.” The prophets rebuke, but they also reassure: God always comes to save His faithful servants and set them free. Today is that day: He comes to our rescue, His Word, His co-eternal Son, the Second Person of the Most Holy Trinity, comes to set us free by becoming one of us.

Perhaps this year, more than any other, we feel a kindred spirit with the sentiments of the ancient people of Israel in the times of their oppression. It indeed has been for many a year of oppression in its own ways: illness or fear of it; loss of loved ones, often without being able to be at their side as they slipped away from this world; economic hardships, even to the point of loss of livelihoods; social isolation; and, of course, being shut out of access to the sacraments.

Being shut out: was not this is the story of the Holy Family the night their Son was born? They were shut out, “because there was no room for them in the inn.” They were shut out, because there was no room for them in people’s hearts.

The Ever-Present God

Whatever the form of oppression one feels, it comes about because people have shut God out of the inn of their hearts. When God is shut out of a society, or any community, then we are the ones who are vengeful and petty: hate, violence and division grow in the world. Sound familiar? Or, should I say, look familiar? That happens because when we shut God out, we cut off our own capacity for love, mercy and forgiveness.

And yet, God continues to allow us to look Him in the face: He continues to be born in our midst at every Mass, when He once again comes down from heaven to take flesh and dwell among us in the Most Holy Eucharist: “...the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” This did not happen just once in history in the historical fact of the Incarnation; it is a mystery of faith that continues in every Mass. He still becomes visible to us.

Yes, this is why these months of Eucharistic deprivation have been such a hardship on our faithful Catholic people; indeed, it is felt as an oppression. So let us remember the lesson of Christmas: God comes to the rescue of His faithful servants. Today He fulfills the prophecy from Isaiah, and sets us free, *when we make room for Him in the inn of our heart.*

Perhaps God has allowed us this period of Eucharistic deprivation precisely to renew our hearts in appreciation of this great gift beyond all measure. It is a quirk of human nature that you don’t really appreciate what you have when it is readily available in abundance and comes easily. And with a significant majority of Catholics saying they do not believe in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, one cannot help but wonder if this is yet another effect – without us even wanting it or realizing it – of there being no room at the inn in our society. God is left out.

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But today we are here, and He is here with us. He allows us to look at Him, and not only to look at Him, but to receive Him, consume Him, become one with Him as His Body and Blood is absorbed into our bloodstream and assimilated into our body,

Conclusion

This is the great blessing of being Catholic: God did not visit the earth once and then return to heaven, leaving behind a group of followers to tell stories about him and convert others to Him. It's way more than that. He repeats this miracle at every Mass; He is ever-present to us in His Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity. Let us make room for him in our hearts, that He may once again come to the help of His servants and set them, set us, free.