

## Second Sunday after Christmas; Fr. Rick, homilist

During these 12 days of Christmas, we have the opportunity to listen to Christmas carols as we linger at the birth of Jesus. One carol I have always found meaningful is based on the 19<sup>th</sup> century American poet, Henry W. Longfellow's poem *Christmas Bells*. Wordsworth writes in his poem: "I heard the bells on Christmas Day. Their old, familiar carols play, and wild and sweet the words repeat of peace on earth goodwill to men."

A few verses later, he writes: And "in despair I bowed my head; There is no peace on earth, I said; For hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth, goodwill to men." But he continues with, "Then pealed the bells more loud and deep: 'God is not dead nor does He [God] sleep, the wrong shall fail, the right prevail with peace on earth goodwill to men.'"

Interestingly enough, I came across a version of *I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day* which is drawn from Wordsworth's poem that adds another three verses by lyricist Haran B. Sorrell. One of which reads: "When men repent and turn from sin, the Prince of Peace then enters in. For Christ is here; His Spirit near brings peace on earth good will to men." The kingdom of God, peace and good will, begins as the birth of an infant, as small as a mustard seed within accepting and nurturing hearts and minds. There, it grows.

The prophet Jeremiah certainly would have wanted peace on earth and goodwill to all. This weeping prophet who tried to turn down the call to be a prophet knew hard times. The temple destroyed, the monarchy extinguished, and many Judeans forcibly removed to Babylon. It was no doubt the worst of times. Yet in spite of this, we hear an oracle of hope. Jeremiah often abused by his fellow citizens has something to say that is positive.

It is a message that God is not absent from them and someday, the joy and peace of being a people of God will be theirs in its entirety. This message plants hope in the hearts of a dispirited people. Does it say when this will occur? No. But what it gives those oppressed an understanding that this too will pass and something much better is ahead. And for the moment, that hope fuels them although more than a few may have asked under their breath "When?"

For first century followers of Christ, Jesus was the one who would offer peace on earth and good will to all. But the question would also arise – how soon?

The Gospel of Matthew affirms the Law and the prophets, the Jewish scripture in Jesus' time. In this gospel, Jesus is portrayed as a second Moses. As we listened to the proclamation of today's gospel, we hear of Jesus and his family migrating to Egypt and their eventual return to Israel. This is reminiscent of Moses being in Egypt as a child and of the exodus of Moses leading the Hebrew slaves to a promised land.

A section left out of today's reading was the slaughter of the innocents as Herod had male children 2 and younger killed. There is no historical validation of this horror, but it is a story reminiscent of Pharaoh having Hebrew male children in the Hebrew Scriptures killed because he felt threatened. So again, a parallel with Jesus is attempted.

Without a doubt, the Jewish followers of Christ who were part of the congregation which Matthew represents could appreciate the comparison. Both were lawgivers; Moses brought the 10 commandments from Mt. Sinai and Jesus climbing to a mount delivers the Sermon on the Mount. The hope of the Hebrew people was that Moses would lead them to their own home, a place of peace. The followers of Christ's hope was that Jesus would bring about the fulness of the reign of God, which is peace. It is peace that the angels sang before the shepherds.

Jesus would bring peace. But one can hear a voice similar to the one in the past asking when will this peace be fully realized? There was a brief prayer spoken by some followers of Christ. It was *marantha* which is Aramaic for *Come, O Lord!*

Within the baptismal commitment of the Episcopal Church, we vow to strive for peace and justice among all people and respect the dignity of every human being. There is a writing about Christ having no body but our body, attributed to a 16<sup>th</sup> century nun named Teresa of Avila. To summarize, we are the hands, feet, eyes, and body of Christ from which Christ shows compassion, walks to do good, and blesses all the world. The child born in Bethlehem invites us to share in his mission.

If I were to think of someone who truly knew the mission of Christ and followed it amazingly, I would name Archbishop Desmond Tutu of blessed memory. Archbishop Tutu died on Sunday, December 26 at 90 years of age. He won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984 for his nonviolent opposition to South Africa's apartheid. Hailed as his nation's conscience, he exhorted his country for six decades to end the official policy of the country's racial segregation.

After apartheid ended in the early 1990's, he was named as chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The Commission was set-up to help deal with the atrocities which occurred during apartheid. The apartheid conflict resulted in violence and human right's abuses. No sector of society was free from violence and right's abuse. Tutu called to account both the indigenous political elite and the Afrikaners; a ruling ethnic group predominantly descended from 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Dutch settlers. But his enduring spirit of reconciliation always shone through.

I have read his and his daughter's *Book of Forgiving*. It is a powerful work outlining the process of getting to authentic forgiveness. I recommend it to everyone. Within the book, there are stories told of the atrocities of apartheid and how this process of truth and reconciliation was used to heal many. The goal was to bring peace to their land the only way it is possible, through justice and forgiveness.

The peace we hear the angels desiring among those God favors is a desire for peace for all humankind. In the birth of Jesus is God's commitment to all. And we as followers of Christ are to live our peace with God and strive for peace and justice for all humankind. Archbishop Tutu did it and that is an encouragement for us. Archbishop Tutu, affectionately known as the Arch, encourages us to "Do your little bit of good where you are; it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelms the world."

I close with the last two verses of Sorrell's additions to *I heard the Bells on Christmas Day*: "O souls amid earth's busy strife, the Word of God is light and life; oh hear His voice, make him your choice, hail peace on earth, good will to all. Then happy, singing on your way, your world will change from night to day; your heart will feel the message real, peace on earth, good will to all." Amen.