

"The Jews and the Gentiles"

"The Poor and the Rich Came"

Matthew 2:1-2, 11-12; Luke 2:8-15; Revelation 2:18

I want to begin my meditation with a word about my selection of the Biblical texts for this Advent season now drawing to a close. While the use of the 7 letters to the 7 churches as found in the book of Revelation is quite out of the ordinary, I think there is a positive purpose and outcome for having done so. As noted previously, the 7 letters contain two essential parts - the first in terms of what God is commending the particular church, and second in terms of things God has against the particular church. Typically, the warnings against the particular sins and practices of a particular church are for the express purpose of what a warning does - issues a dire warning and a word encouraging change. In terms of the warnings issued, this Advent series intends these warnings to also point out how much Christ has forgiven. The typical way of looking at such warnings are, "Be ye, warned! And changed! If not,!!!" But this Advent I want us to consider the warnings thusly, "Do you see what I have against you? I want you to consider how much I, Jesus, have forgiven you. Do you understand why I came to earth? Do you now better understand a fuller extent of the implications of my birth? Isn't this what Christmas is all about?"

"And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us." (Luke 2:8-15, KJV)

This past Sunday I alluded to one or two fine points of tonight's message. Taken together, the message is a simple one. The Gospel was intended to be preached to both the Jew and the Gentile and the poor and the rich. The promises of the Gospel are available to all who would come to Jesus regardless of wealth and socio-economic status. As a perhaps necessary reminder, the term "Gentile" is not pejorative, only descriptive, meaning a person who is not of Jewish descent or faith. A "non-Jew" is another way of saying it. Jesus was of course about breaking down barriers, as is often noted today, but not in every way that some folks believe and postulate.

It has been rightfully noted that throughout history the poor and destitute, the folks who find themselves at the bottom rung of the socio-economic ladder, finally have someone in Jesus who stands for them, and who loves them. In a world that is perpetually known for socio- and economic- inequities, the poor and uneducated of mankind know what it is to be considered not only of low status

but of low worth. Jesus changed that, at least in some critical ways. Folks at the bottom of the social ladder, so to speak, had someone important who loved them for who they are as human beings.

Thus, in our time it has become fashionable and politically profitable to take up the cause and be champions of the so-called underclass. But the sad part is that far too often the proverbial baby is thrown out with the bath water. It is socially and politically correct to thus spurn and demean those of monetary wealth and social status. If the pendulum formerly had been swung to the one extreme of the spectrum, the pendulum has been swung by socio and political forces to the other. This is an indication that mankind will never get things fully correct but are in perpetual need for the Gospel message to be the correcting force we need so critically.

There is a simple lesson I would like us to learn from both Matthew and Luke's Gospels, a lesson many have never heard or been taught. The Gospel of Matthew, in its content and format, was written to convince the Jews of Judaism, then and now, that Jesus WAS the Messiah long promised and prophesied about. Matthew is in this one sense a Jewish Gospel. Jesus's job, in this respect, was to convince the Jews that he was the Jewish Messiah who fulfilled all that was prophesied about him. He had to convince them that he had the power, and prerogative, to save. Matthew 1:21 tells us that Mary "will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." (NIV) Jesus is the Greek word for "Joshua" which means "the Lord saves."

The Gospel of Luke, in its particular form and content, was written to convince the Gentiles, then and now, that Jesus WAS the Savior of the world. Jesus was not only Savior to Jews. Luke is in this sense a Gentile Gospel. It was the job of Luke's Gospel to persuade the Gentiles of the world that Jesus, and he alone, had the power and prerogative to save, that he was, is, and always would be the only way to heaven. All one needed to do was accept in faith that Jesus died for the sins of all but which was and is applied to those who accepted this faith and which resulted in a committed discipleship.

The ultimate point is that the true, full Gospel is the good news of God that is for everyone who would come to Jesus in faith and in terms of discipleship and service. My selection of those few verses from both Matthew's and Luke's Gospels was intended to help us focus on not only the intents of these 2 Gospels but of their practical application.

It should dishearten us when we see any class of folks disparaged, whether they are of the upper or lower class. It should dishearten us when we see any class of folks disparaged whether they are well educated or uneducated. We have to be on our guard against cultural voices, however well-meaning they are, that turn our hearts against the full meaning, and full application, of the Gospel. Scripture of course has strong words of warning about the dangers of wealth and education, but neither are condemned nor forbidden. It was a somewhat-educated Pharisee named Nicodemus (John's Gospel, chapter 3) who approached Jesus in the middle of the night to check out Jesus. He also was a member of the Sanhedrin, the religious leaders of Judaism. We know from the

latter part of John's Gospel that Nicodemus was there to help Joseph of Arimathea who asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Scripture tells us, "Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes [to take care of Jesus's body "in accordance with Jewish burial customs"], about seventy-five pounds." (John 19:39, NIV) Thus, what we have is a redemption story involving a fellow who was well educated, at least moderately wealthy, and a leading member of Judaism's high council.

It was not by happenstance that Nicodemus brought myrrh to properly take care of Jesus' body, for myrrh was one of the 3 gifts brought to Jesus by the Magi. Myrrh was an expensive embalming powder. Aloe was a fragrant powdered sandalwood used generally as a perfume. The aloe, and its fragrance referred to, reminds me of Paul's letter to the church at Corinth where he offers thanks to God "who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life." (2 Cor 2:14-16, NIV) Christmas time is indeed a time to reflect on the affect Jesus Christ intended on having in terms of his disciples.

Yes, the history of mankind is a history of the poor and the forgotten, the have-nots, and the down-trodden. The history of mankind is a history of the rich and the famous, and the haves. As one university professor said to us in class one day, "Folks, it's a 'mixed-bag'." At times, and in certain circles, it has been fashion to lampoon and impugn the rich, as if this practice can make up for the historical injustices done to the have-nots. Academia, and even the church herself, has gone this route, as if it is a remedy for past transgressions. In terms of the church, it seems that it has been forgotten that King Solomon was fabulously wealthy, wealth that God seemed pleased to bestow upon him. What Solomon ultimately was criticized for and led to his downfall was not his wealth but his submitting to the pressure of his many foreign wives thus having his heart turned away from the LORD. Solomon, in order to rule God's people wisely and properly, did not ask God for riches but for a discerning heart. "The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. So God said to him, "Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be. Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for-- both riches and honor-- so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings." (1 Kings 3:10-13, NIV)

Just to be clear, I want to avoid two things that are equally detestable. First, I hope I have not validated the state of poverty and thus, second, excused the world, and particularly the church, from its particular responsibilities in terms of the poor and the so-called "have-nots" of our world.

Before I close my meditation I want to share a word about the jigsaw puzzle situated in front of the Communion table which was finished just this past Monday. Alicia has been talking with Cora about Jesus, Christmas, Christmas presents, and all that. Alicia told Cora the other day that Christmas was all about

Jesus and that the presents are not the most important thing. Presents are important but not the most important. Alicia even went on to say that we could have Christmas with no presents at all! Well, Cora's facial expression conveyed her obvious skepticism! I'll let your imagination fill in that mental picture. This puzzle was something of a challenge so Cora was unable to help with it. Or, perhaps more accurately said, I wouldn't let Cora help, even when she wanted to help so much. But as the last piece was ready to be slid and pressed into place, I asked Cora if she would do it. She was quite happy to do so. I then held the puzzle board up (at an angle so the puzzle didn't slip off or fall apart - I will glue it together later) so we all could get a good look at it. By instinct, or by prompting of the Holy Spirit at the sudden opportunity presented, Alicia asked Cora, "How many gifts do you see?" Cora looked for a short moment and answered, "Three."

It is a challenge to teach young children about the truest and deepest meaning of Christmas, and how the fact of Christmas presents, Christmas trees, manger scenes, and the birth of a special Baby Boy all work together, without being in conflict. Let me suggest it is not only a challenge for young children but for us all.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is always hard pressed to find what I refer to as the Biblical middle in terms of anything and everything. As the season of Advent is nearly ended, and the actual season of Christmas about to begin, it is for us to consider not only tonight but in the year to come these implications, and many others, which arise from the birth of the baby Lord Jesus. I leave this things, and many others that have arisen in your heart and which have come to your mind, to you this blessed and holy night.