

A Adv 01, 28 Nov 2010 St Michael's Studio City  
RCL Isaiah 2.1-5, Psalm 122, Romans 13.11-14, Matthew 24.36-44

## The Meantime

This is the meantime. This is the meantime, not in the sense of a meanspirited or a nasty era, but in the sense of "for the time being."

There is the beginning of things, when God saw that everything was good, and there is the end of things, when God will make all things good again. This is the meantime, the time in-between, the end of the beginning and the beginning of the end. It is a time when the goodness that God blessed at the beginning is still the foundation of reality but is also a fugitive in the world we live in, fleeing the selfishness and complacency and foulness with which we fill our lives. We lie, we cheat, we steal, we hoard our money and ourselves, we make war, we ignore the poor, we exploit the vulnerable, we deny basic rights to whole segments of our population, we let the sick languish. There is evil in our hearts. There is a soul-sickness at the heart of us. Goodness is a fugitive in its own universe. At the same time there is love and beauty and creativity. There are those who give themselves for the healing of our people and of the nations, those who recall us to the reality of God's expectations for us, those who ask the most of us rather than the least, who ask us to sacrifice rather than to clutch to ourself, the Mother Therasas, the Desmond Tutus, the saints of our church cycle, the saints who live next door. There is goodness in our hearts. There is a soul-salvation at work in us. So we live in the meantime, the time in-between the triumph of goodness at the beginning of things and the triumph of goodness at the end of things. And we wonder about the triumph of goodness in ourself and in our time. It is the meantime for us.

If all our life is meantime, Advent is the yearly incarnation of the meantime. It is the time between the celebration of the end, which we anticipated last Sunday at the end of the liturgical year, and the celebration of the new beginning which is Christmas, which God made in the Baby of Bethlehem two thousand years ago. If our whole church year and our whole human life is about the meantime, the working out of God's good will for us, Advent is the particular focus of "meantimeness." It is one of the reasons that Advent has an unsettled emotional and spiritual feel to us.

It is neither this nor that, but a little of both. We like things settled and Advent is unsettled, a spiritual dynamic set between God's creation and God's finality. The unsettledness is increased by the dissonance between what the Church is doing and what our culture is doing. All around us are Santa Clauses, smiling elves, flying reindeer, hohohos, and jingle bells.

Our church postpones all of this until the twelve days of Christmas beginning on December 25th. What we church folk do now is wait. We wait, the essence of meantimeness. Our waiting is intentionally colored by some difficult realities. Our ancestors in the faith knew clearly what we moderns try so desperately to ignore, that we cannot have Easter without Lent, Christmas without Advent, graduation without years of study, true love without real loyalty, resurrection without crucifixion, God-with-us without a desperate sense of longing and incompleteness. We church folk are the realists, however imperfect, in the modern world. We are as eager as the rest to give and receive presents, to laugh, to sing, to be sentimental about angels and the Bethlehem Baby. But we know that all of that comes at a price, a price paid by God in Her willingness to be with us, a price paid by every human being who works their way out of our primal selfishness by putting God and His work first. So we postpone our Christmas jubilation until December 25th and concentrate for the previous four weeks on

our incompleteness, our need to wait, our need to reflect, our need to take action, our need to open our heart to God. It's all so unsettled, so in the meantime. But it's also so true to reality.

So what do we do in the meantime? That's what our spiritual life is all about, our struggle to know and do what God wants of us, our struggle to leave our primal selfishness, our struggle to let God have His way with us.

Pointing that way are certainly our minds and our experience, the wisdom that comes with a thoughtful engagement in the world and in life itself.

Saint Paul tells us in Romans that the universe itself tells us something about God, if we will let it. But more powerful is the life of God in Jesus Christ, what He did and what He said, and what His people have learned about Him in the centuries since. So we read our Bibles and we consult our tradition.

Let us hear some of that wisdom today.

Jesus tells us that God's timetable is unknown and unpredictable, so we must live as if we are going to account for the stewardship of our lives to God in the next moment, the next turn around the corner, the next heartbeat that is expected but fails to come. God in the Son of Man will certainly return to the world at the end of time, which is completely unknowable. But no less will the Son of Man return to this world in the last second of your life and the last second of my life, to take us to Himself. Since that moment, too, is unpredictable, the only wise course is to live each moment as if it were our last, as if our moment of accountability has come. We are not to put off our repentance, not to dawdle with our sins, not to presume on God's patience. As Jesus said, "Always be ready. You don't know when the Son of Man will come." (Matthew 24.44)

We live in a society that sees nothing wrong with drunkenness, vulgarity, indecency, quarrelsomeness, jealousy, wild parties. Indeed, these things are celebrated in our culture; just check out our movies, our tv, our advertisements, our novels, our magazines. Perhaps these things are celebrated because in the past our puritanism suppressed even an appropriate joy in life. But that past mistake does not justify ignoring the destruction of soul that comes with the things we have just mentioned, the bone-deep selfishness that is the root of that kind of licence. So we pay attention to Saint Paul in our reading from Romans today, not because we are puritans at heart, but because we know that our joy and our celebration of life must be appropriate, creative, constructive, and inclusive of those who have less, inclusive of those who are different. Paul, who can certainly be a bit wordy, can be as short and pithy as his Lord Jesus. Putting succinctly all the decisions that we make each day about how to live our lives, Paul says "If you love others, you have done all that the Law demands.... No one who loves others will harm them. So love is all that the Law demands," all that God demands. (Romans 13.8-10)

Psalms 122 is a prayer for peace in Jerusalem. That seems a bit removed from our everyday life, though God knows we all want peace in the Mideast. But Jerusalem really means our spiritual home. Whenever we read "Jerusalem" in the Psalms we should mentally translate "spiritual home." So this is a prayer for peace, for a unity with self, with others, and with God, in our spiritual home, in our soul.

The Old Testament prophet Isaiah had a vision of our spiritual home, of Jerusalem at peace, of our soul, of a union of all peoples of the world – all at peace, all focused on the centrality of God in life, of God's availability, of our willingness to respond to God, all busy re-working weapons into tools for

creativity and abundance. "...they will never make war or attack one another. People of [God], let's live by the light of the Lord." (Isaiah 2.4-5)

All of that is a lot to do in the meantime. But it is our duty and it is our joy. Welcome to the meantime and Happy Advent.