

BEFORE THE KISS

Advent 2 – Cycle B: Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; Mark 1:1-8

In my last year of seminary, I took a course on rites of passage with Professor Ron Grimes of the Department of Religion and Culture at Wilfrid Laurier University. What I enjoyed most was how it deepened my sensitivity for how the many rituals in which we participate succeed or fail in their work of transformation. The course really served to sharpen my critical faculties, not only in evaluating a given ritual, but also in understanding the significance of ritual action in different contexts. It was a difficult course: as a student without a real vocabulary for describing ritual clinically, my learning curve was steep. But I have never ceased to be grateful for the skills it gave me in understanding why we use liturgy in our faith communities, for instance, to communicate mystery and meaning.

Although I led a disastrous mid-term seminar, I did eventually pass the course and shortly thereafter was ordained into the Ministry of Word and Sacrament. But almost everything I did after ordination was a new experience when it came to the rituals of the church: interns/curates/vicars/deacons – whichever term you would use to describe those soon-to-be-ordained – don't preside at weddings, baptisms, or Holy Communion. And it was the reference to the kiss shared by righteousness and peace in today's psalm, Psalm 85, that reminded me of my first wedding as a new minister.

Although the *Service Book and Hymnal*, copyright 1958, provided for the bride and groom to kiss as part of the wedding ritual, neither the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, copyright 1978, nor its eventual successor volume *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, copyright 2006, provide for a nuptial kiss. In the wedding liturgy, the bride and groom make vows to one another in front of witnesses, they exchange rings, pray prayers, and often receive Holy Communion, but the two never become one at any point in the wedding ritual. When I looked at this omission with my fresh Ron Grimes eyes, I saw ritual failure written all over the wedding liturgy. Surely, the covenant promises are "sealed with a kiss." Surely the two people becoming one, even temporarily as they kiss one another in front of their guests and witnesses, confirms all of our reading and preaching and praying about love and marriage as the special gift the wedding couple share. I am still not sure whether the proclamation of the marriage or the nuptial kiss is the climax of the ritual action – it's one or the other – but I know that without the nuptial kiss, we fail to seal the deal, so to speak.

And so, I always assign kissing homework to my wedding couples: they rarely object. But it's important for me and, I believe, for their witnesses and guests that they get it right; that they realize that all the planning and preparation they have done culminate in the moment in the wedding ceremony when their lips touch. At that point, all the tension is released. Phew! They did it! They are finally married. We can get on with our lives now. And although we smile at such thoughts, this is precisely why weddings are rites of passage. They allow us to incorporate April and David, for example, into our community as people whose love for one another has been made public and acceptable in our sight, and through our corporate worship at their wedding, is blessed, we pray, by God. We move *toward* rites of passage, and we move *from* rites of passage. They provide for change in our society; they *move us* into a new reality.

This morning's readings from Isaiah and Mark seek to capture some of the movement toward change, some of the hunger for change we desperately need in our world. For the people of Israel, dispersed into exile and enduring years of sojourning in Babylon and other parts of the mid-East, Europe, and North Africa, their deep desire and their deep need is to return to their homeland and have one more chance at getting it right as God's chosen ones. In exile, they have had years to reflect on how they failed to live according to their high calling. Through their personal and corporate longing, and through the preaching and writing of the prophets, they have come to understand better who God is and who they are as the children of God; and they want a chance to begin again. The vision the prophet paints for them in this morning's First Reading frames their experience with meaning. They have suffered by wanting to become a great nation and a mighty military and economic power. If those things happen, they have learned from the prophets, they happen because of God's blessing, not because of entitlement or natural superiority over other peoples. Believing in their own greatness and destiny led to the division of their country into a northern and a southern kingdom, and eventually to being easily conquered. "Divide and conquer" is an aphorism we understand. And deuterio-Isaiah also proclaims God's faithfulness to them: "He will feed his flock like a shepherd," we read. "He will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep." Tender imagery for a God whose love of righteousness is

uncompromising. George Frederick Handel in his oratorio *Messiah*, always sung at this time of year by the Grand Philharmonic Choir and other choral forces in our community, joined into one duet these verses from Isaiah describing God's tenderness and Jesus' words in Matthew inviting discipleship and service in his name. Jesus says, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me." And later he says, "my yoke is easy and my burden is light." But the words "yoke" and "burden" are still present through all this anticipated grace. Righteousness, we learn from both Isaiah and Jesus, requires our full commitment. Our yoke and burden is living faithfully, according to gospel justice and gospel love. The grace of God is not cheap grace; rather, it is costly grace. Before the climax of the kiss between righteousness and peace, we have work to do. And it is in the prophecy from Isaiah, the call to repentance from John the Baptist, and in the gospel of God proclaimed in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ that we receive the charge. Without justice, without righteousness, we cannot kiss peace. Justice, we are reminded on this Second Sunday of Advent, is the pre-condition of peace. And preparing the way in our world for Christ's advent, preparing our world to receive the gospel, means donning the yoke and the burden of discipleship in Christ's name.

And so, as compromised as we are by sin and human nature and our desire not to get involved in the messiness of life – don't worry be happy is the popular mantra of our generation – the gospel calls us to take seriously the issues of injustice that fall into our laps. For years, several in our congregation have been concerned for how poverty just continues to grow in our region and in our country. It makes no sense in a region and nation as affluent as ours is to allow this to continue: we have the resources to right the wrong, but we fail to do the hard work that would reverse the trend. The plight of the people of Attawapaskat was made public this week in our news media, and there is general concern right now at all levels of Canadian society that the poverty in this community be addressed: it makes no sense. But politicians and commentators at all levels realize that somehow we need to do more than throw money at the social problems present in our country: together, we need to enter more deeply the messiness of life. As difficult as this crisis is for the residents of Attawapaskat, it is a much-needed crisis.

Peter Kent, the Minister of the Environment for our country, signalled this week that we cannot in good conscience keep our commitment to the Kyoto Protocol on the Environment. But beyond the political need for candour and international leverage is the reality that Canada is compromised in its extraction of oil from Alberta's tar sands. We have oil, the world needs oil and, for as long as the oil lasts, Canada will benefit economically from selling its huge reserves. But burning this fuel is the real question for the world. We are over-using so many of earth's resources, not to give life and provide for life, but to make a buck. Like Israel and Judah before the exile, we are invested in notions of greatness and entitlement that will, at length, destroy our planet. As the children of God, we must at least worry and be unhappy about where we live and how we live with others. Earth is our habitat; the suffering peoples of this world are our brothers and sisters. And the gospel of God, as present in the Hebrew Bible as it is in Christian scripture, calls us to do justice, to live righteousness, to put on the yoke, and shoulder the burden.

Before righteousness and peace kiss one another, we have homework to do.