

GOSPEL JOY: A GIFT FROM FRANCIS

Year A, Advent 1 – Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44

“Live every day as if it were your last” was a bit of advice I was frequently given by those who were older and wiser during my formative years. Interestingly, as I grew and matured, as I began experiencing loss through the death of loved ones, the phrase took on new meaning for me; I began hearing it as an existential statement, compatible with other thoughts such as “we only pass this way but once.” But I think originally “live every day as if it were your last” was an idea that proceeded from readings like today’s Gospel, in which Jesus essentially warns his disciples that the end could come any time and they would be judged on their faith and good works. And so, the effect this aphorism initially had on me, the effect that was intended, I expect, was to persuade me to live my life with one eye on eternity; to be good and do good, so that when I was called to account on the Last Day, my faith in God and discipleship of the Lord Jesus would be in evidence.

The gift Martin Luther gave to the Christian community through his proclamation of Saint Paul’s writing that we are saved not by our good works, but rather by God’s unbounded grace revealed in Christ Jesus, removes some of the punch from aphorisms such as “live every day as if it were your last.”

It certainly did for me when I first encountered Lutheran theology at age 27; and it moved me to re-read passages of Scripture like today’s Gospel and the Second Reading from Romans for a meaning beyond a concern for personal salvation. What I now see and hear in these passages relates to that “one eye on eternity” I mentioned before. These two readings present a perspective on our life together that is the very opposite of existential. An existentialist would say, “We’re born, we live, and then we die. End of story.” Saint Paul says “We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living” (Romans 14:7-9).

One of the most wonderful and, at the same time, disturbing components in the gospel Jesus proclaimed was that everything matters; that the wall between heaven and earth is a wall of our own construction, not God’s; that the profound mystery of human life notwithstanding, there is no ambiguity in our call to bring heaven near, to take down that wall that keeps Jesus and his gospel at a safe distance; that as much as it appears that we are earthbound creatures with a lifespan of threescore and ten (according to the Bible), we are also the children of God whose call it is to testify not to the meaningless of existence, but to how God seeks us, plants seeds of faith in us, and prays for our transformation from those without hope to those who see that the purpose of our life together is to make a home for the gifts of God – love, faithfulness, justice, righteousness, grace, mercy, forgiveness, and peace. Jesus calls these gifts God’s good news; and Christians see Jesus as the embodiment, the incarnation, if you will, of God’s good news – the gospel, in other words.

And so, Advent is a wake-up call, if you will, to remember who we are because of God’s entering our lives and giving us a heavenly perspective, an eye on eternity. At Christmas, we pray that Christ may be born anew in us that we might be reborn as his disciples and as the children of God. The Sundays of Advent orient us toward the renewal and rebirth that is ours in Jesus Christ and his gospel, leading us more deeply into the knowledge and experience of God and God’s grace. All of our celebrations, all of the festivity and light and music and colour and gift-giving and gathering of friends and family point to how blessed we are. Without question, we often forget the Reason for the season; but the Reason remains, and is present in our love for others, the faith that is kindled through the power of our storytelling, the justice that is created as we reach beyond self to insure everyone has enough food and companionship, the righteousness of God and the grace, mercy, forgiveness, and peace of God heralded in God’s solidarity with the human family in the gift of Jesus, the Divine-made-human, the Word-become-flesh, as Saint John puts it. “It is a thing most wonderful” as one of our choir anthems puts it. And truthfully, we need Advent and Christmas as an opportunity to refocus on who we are as those whom God loves.

Earlier this year, a most extraordinary thing occurred. Pope Benedict who many in the Christian community saw as a church leader whose desire was to turn back the clock to an almost pre-Vatican II model of the Roman Catholic Church, stepped down. A new pope was elected who, it appears, has significantly different concerns than maintaining the *status quo*. Taking the name Francis, a nod to the

servant discipleship of Francis of Assisi, Pope Francis appears to be a reformer. He has not made any sweeping changes in dogma or doctrine, but he seems less interested in the institution of the church than most of his predecessors, and more interested in how well the church proclaims the good news of Jesus Christ. We might call him an evangelical pope, because of his seeming disinterest in the trappings of his office and his conspicuous passion for gospel over law.

Earlier this week, he published a paper which, among other things, gives voice to his passion for the gospel. Entitled *The Joy of the Gospel*, he presents a vision not for an institution intent on its self-preservation, but rather for a missionary church whose doors should always be open. In a piece for Vatican Radio Philippa Hitchen makes this report on *The Joy of the Gospel*. "As we open our hearts," Francis writes, "so the doors of our churches must always be open and the sacraments available to all." "The Eucharist," he says, is not a prize for the perfect, but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak." And his ideal of the church is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than caught up in a slavish preoccupation with liturgy and doctrine, procedure and prestige. "God save us," he exclaims, "from a worldly church with superficial spiritual and pastoral trappings." Urging a greater role for the laity, Francis warns of excessive clericalism and calls for a more incisive female presence in the church, especially where important decisions are made.

Looking beyond the church, he denounces the current economic system as "unjust at its root", based on a tyranny of the marketplace, in which financial speculation, widespread corruption, and tax evasion reign supreme.

He also has a vision of a church that is poor and for the poor. He wants Christians to pay particular attention to those on the margins of society, including the homeless, the addicted, refugees, indigenous peoples, the elderly who are increasingly isolated and abandoned, and migrants. "For the church," he writes, "the option for the poor is primarily a theological category...This is why I want a church that is poor and for the poor...As long as the problems of the poor are not radically resolved...no solution will be found for this world's problems. Politics, although often denigrated, remains a lofty vocation and one of the highest forms of charity. I beg the Lord to grant us more politicians who are genuinely disturbed by the lives of the poor." He adds, "any church community, if it believes it can forget about the poor, runs the risk of breaking down."

[The full text of *The Joy of the Gospel* is available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium_en.html]

A three-paragraph synopsis of a 224-page document does not do it justice. But I hope that even this brief description provides a glimpse of how significant this "exhortation", as Francis calls it, is.

Although it is a document written for the Catholic Church and, in particular, for leaders in the church, its application is universal, constituting as powerful gift not only to the whole Christian community, but to people of all faith. The precision with which he names the ills of the world is, in itself, a gift, providing a simple paradigm for determining both the worth and the authenticity of all our individual and corporate church activities and projects. Many years ago Richard Caemmerer appealed to our Lutheran constituency to "choose to be poor" for the sake of the gospel. How counterintuitive-but-needed is this message for all churches and all Christians who have become, as Francis says "worldly". The drive to survive, so prevalent in the Canadian church, has led us toward harmonizing worldly and gospel values. Francis' paper lightens our darkness by reminding us, as do today's Gospel and Second Reading, that we are not only children of the earth, but those whom God has called, formed, enlivened, and commissioned with the good news of Jesus. Awake, God says, and greet the new morn!