

Homily

1st Sunday of Advent - A

Rev. Peter G. Jankowski

November 30 – December 01, 2019

Is 2: 1-5

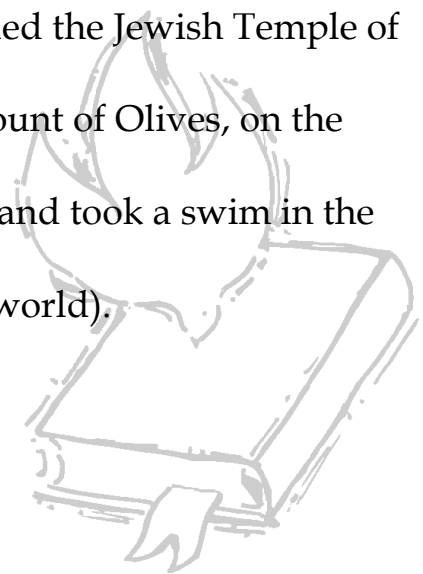
Ps 122: 1-2, 3-4, 4-5, 6-7, 8-9

Rom 13: 11-14

Mt 24: 37-44

Two years ago around this time, I found myself sitting on a camel over in Israel. A couple nice folks from a Pilgrimage group asked me to accompany some forty-five good Christians from the area on a trip to the Holy Land as we walked a good number of roads that Jesus travelled during his time on earth.

On this pilgrimage, we had the chance to sail on the Sea of Galilee and eat fish from head to tail, just like the disciples did in the first century. We visited the home of John the Baptist and the home where Mary encountered the Angel Gabriel at the Annunciation. We visited what was left of the Wailing Wall that surrounded the Jewish Temple of the First Century. We celebrated Mass at the Mount of Olives, on the Mountain where Jesus preached the Beatitudes and took a swim in the Dead Sea (the lowest geographical point in the world).



On the early days of the journey, we had a chance to celebrate Mass on the other side of the small cave where Jesus was born (at each site we visited, regardless of the time of year, the Mass of the day was the one associated with that religious spot that we venerated). After that Mass, we walked around to the small hole in a cave where Jesus was born. The folks in the Holy Land placed a star on this spot, which we all had a chance to kiss and venerate.

Around this time two years ago, we had the chance to wake up at 3:00 a.m. so that we could walk the final steps our Lord took before his crucifixion at the Via Dolorosa (the Way of the Cross) at 4:00 a.m. We walked this path early in the morning because later in the day, vendors would be selling their wares on the streets, making this journey that much more difficult to travel. During this walk, Muslim chants were piped through the sound system, as this signified the first of five times during the day when the faithful of that religion would begin to pray.

At the end of this journey, we reached the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the place where Jesus was crucified. Because we arrived at

such an early time, we had the rare opportunity to celebrate Mass at 6:00 a.m. on the top of Christ's tomb. Again, to reach the tomb we had to enter small caves that led to our destination. The place of the tomb was so small that only a couple folks could enter; I was inside celebrating Mass while the rest of the pilgrims crawled through a hole to place their olivewood cross on the top of the tomb. At the end of Mass, the Franciscans who had custody of the church in the early morning hours gave us a bottle of blessed oil that poured from the rocks into that tomb. I used the oil to anoint the foreheads of those on the trip and then took the oil back with me to my last parish, where I anointed the foreheads of those in my parish who could not make the journey with us.

The folks in the Holy Land were also nice enough to gift us with a few hundred olivewood rosaries that I distributed to the faithful on my return. When I celebrated the Mass for St. Anne on her feast day July 26th, I was given three hundred more rosaries to distribute - all of them were passed out by the end of the Mass!

The reason I bring all of this to your attention was because, two years ago on the penultimate evening of our trip, my DRE at the parish where I formerly served wanted to fill bags with candy to distribute to all the pilgrims on the trip. Back when, my former DRE and secretary lamented with me how they were unable to pay for a trip like this, even though they both wanted to travel to the Holy Land. Through the generosity of some folks in the area, we found the resources so that both of them could travel what I called the spiritual highlight of our lives.

At the end of our journey, my DRE convinced me to leave our hotel later in the evening to frequent a Muslim candy store to fill those bags. The good faithful person that the store owner was, the Muslim who ran the store was invested in his evening prayers while we passed through the door. The guy thought that we were nuts, a Catholic priest and a Christian woman buying loads of candy at night.

When we purchased our goods, we returned back to our hotel where a McDonald's was attached to the building (I never thought I would visit a McDonald's at the Holy Land!). While in the restaurant, we

visited the kiosk which allowed us to purchase drinks, make any kind of burger we wanted to make and offered us four different types of French Fries to consume. We then bribed the cashier with candy so that we could spend a little time after closing, filling forty-five bags with candy.

After our project was completed, we approached the receptionist at the front desk of the hotel, asking her for the room numbers of all of our pilgrims. The receptionist asked the reason for what we asked and we told her that we were participating in the tradition of St. Nicholas, the patron saint of children whose Feast Day is celebrated on December 6th. The receptionist had never heard of St. Nicholas nor the tradition, so I had to use my bad historical knowledge of the saint to instruct her as to what we were doing.

I told the receptionist that St. Nicholas was fourth century saint from Asia Minor (modern day Turkey), who, as legend would tell us, was from a very wealthy family. When Nicholas inherited his parents money and became bishop of this region, he decided to share his resources with the poor and the needy of this region of the world.

As legend tells us, a father from Asia Minor lamented that his three daughters could not marry, since custom of the time dictated that the father give a “dowry” of money to whatever man his daughter decided to marry. Since the man was poor and without means, none of his daughters could be given away for marriage.

As we are told in this story, Nicholas heard about this man’s suffering and, one evening, snuck by the man’s house and dropped a sack of gold through an open window so that the first daughter could get married. The second year, Nicholas did the same for the second daughter. The third year, the father finally coming to his senses, stayed up all night to witness this third act of kindness and realized that the kind benefactor was actually the bishop of his region!

We are told that Ss. Cyril & Methodius carried this and other stories to the Dutch Europeans that they served and that this story of “Sinter Klaas” spread through Northern Europe and with the immigrants who came to the New World. This “Sinter Klaas” or “Santa Claus” story took root and became the secularized version that we honor today.

Out of curiosity, I asked the receptionist if she had heard of the story about St. Lucy, a saint associated with Scandanavian Countries as well as in Italy and whose Feast Day is celebrated on December 13th. I told the nice lady that St. Lucy lived during the Diocletian controversy of the third century, as the Roman Government was eradicating any Christians they could find. Tradition tells us that Lucy used to travel the night with provisions for the poor, lighting her way with lit candles attached to a wreath over her head. Lucy (the etymology of the name means “light”) died a gruesome martyr’s death but her legend continues on with young ladies from Europe walking the streets with these same type of wreaths and candles placed over their heads (good luck getting girls in this country to wear lit candles on their persons!).

I certainly know that the receptionist would not be aware of the traditions of Our Lady of Guadalupe or Las Posadas, two Latin American traditions celebrated here in the states. We are taught that in 1531, the Blessed Mother appeared to a man we know as St. Juan Diego (whose Feast Day is on December 9th) and instructed him to bring a

cloak with her image to his local bishop. When St. Juan Diego unfurled the cloak, a bunch of roses fell from the cloak, which we commemorate each December 12th by celebrated a Mass for Guadalupe and then distributing roses to the mothers of our community.

I bring up all of these customs as I did with the hotel receptionist from Jerusalem because in the Christian life, these stories of the faith highlight the importance of the Season of Advent. Before we commemorate the Solemnity of the Lord's Incarnation into the world at Christmastime, we remind ourselves of those who carried this light throughout the world with acts of kindness and love. The more we invest in these stories, the more we understand the importance of us learning the stories and living them out in today's age. If we have any chance to enter the life of salvation, we must live like Christ by learning about Christ and then modeling that example like St. Nicholas, St. Lucy, St. Juan Diego and so many others. Our society is so imbued with the traditions of the secular that we often dismiss the stories of Christianity which allow us to understand our purpose of life and why we are here

(perhaps Churches are as empty as they are because our collective society has placed the secular over the spiritual, thus forgetting about what really matters and offers us salvation in life).

Thus, here at the parishes I serve, we are obligated out of love to learn and share these stories with the rest of our community. Within your parish bulletins and mailed to your homes are spiritual opportunities that we wish to highlight this Advent Season. This weekend at the parishes I am serving, Bob Thompson was nice enough to get St. Nicholas to visit our community, telling of his story of faith and passing out candy canes in the process. Over at St. Patrick's in Momence, we will celebrate the Our Lady of Guadalupe celebration on December 12th at 6:00 p.m. with the distribution of roses to the mothers at the end of the Mass. On December 22nd, we will celebrate at St. Patrick's a shortened version of "Las Posadas" (literally, "the inns") where kids dressed up like Mary and Joseph walk from inn to inn, being rejected by the innkeepers and finding a place within a cave to give birth to the light of the world. We also have the opportunity to take a coat and

toy collection (new or gently used) for the poor of our Hopkins Park Mission and Sacred Heart parish.

This First Sunday of Advent celebrates the two comings of Christ – the one at the Christmas Nativity and the one at the end of humanity. May we never take these comings for granted nor their importance to our faith lives. Let us learn them well and share them with the people that we meet. This is how we prepare for the Season of Christmas and this is our prayer.