

Homily for Trinity XXIV

+ It's a common gripe among traditional Christians that the so-called "Holiday Season," that secular orgy of modern capitalism which begins immediately after Halloween and ends abruptly on Boxing Day, has completely obscured the sacred origins from which it sprung, eliminating the sobriety, spiritual introspection, and attitude of expectancy that ought to characterize a Holy Advent, as well as cheapening, with its incessant noise and its painfully contrived and artificial festivity, that quiet, unspeakable joy of Christmastide. "Lo, how a rose ever blooming, from tender stem hath sprung," we sing, "It came a flowret bright, amid the snows of winter, when half-spent was the night." I've always thought the lines of this German carol perfectly capture the awful wonder of the mystery that is the Incarnation, and the liturgical and spiritual setting in which we ought, if we can, to approach it. Truth be told, that ever-blooming rose, these days, if we ever get around to contemplating it, seems hidden behind gaudy displays and lighted shrubbery, and the snows of winter from which it springs are more and more trodden and muddied with the boots of a frenzied, and for many, ultimately noxious material consumption. Enough already. As my father has taken to quipping, "every time a Christmas song gets played on the radio before Thanksgiving, an elf has to kill a baby reindeer."

Well, as annoying as we might find the gyrations of a wider culture that will not keep Christ in Christmas, or holy in a holiday, the truth is that, in our own tradition, the Holiday Season is, in fact, now underway. Due to the moveable date of Easter, there are always a variable number of Sundays after Trinity, that is, in ordinary time. If you follow the Daily Office lectionary, you will find that, this year, the 24th Sunday after Trinity is also "The Third Sunday Before Advent," the day on which our Church Kalendar pivots decisively toward Christmas. Thus, the Old Testament lesson this morning, from which I have been taking my sermon text throughout this Trinitytide, is our first liturgical encouragement along that path.

It comes to us from the prophet Habbakuk, which has got to be the least-popular biblical name of all time. I have yet to meet, either in fact or in fiction, a person named Habbakuk. Scholars are not even sure what the name means in Hebrew—perhaps, based on similarity to other Semitic languages, it may have something to do with flowers, or perhaps it means "embrace." He is a prophet about whom we know almost nothing. He lived, it seems, in that nightmare interval between the destruction of Northern Israel and the eventual destruction of Judah and Jerusalem, in the early 6th century B.C. The content of Habbakuk's prophecy is not particularly unique, especially if you've been paying attention to my homilies from other Old Testament prophets throughout the summer. It follows a kind of standard formula—"Wow, things are really bad here. Wickedness and oppression are reigning in the land instead of law and justice. How long are you going to let this go on, God? Oh... you're not. Judgment is coming, and it will be terrible. Well... what then? What of your people? Is your wrath the last word? What form, if any, will our re-birth, our restoration, and our redemption take?" But listen for yourselves:

Art thou not from everlasting, O Lord my God, mine Holy One? we shall not die. O Lord, thou hast ordained them for judgment; and, O mighty God, thou hast established them for correction. Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity: wherefore lookest thou upon them that deal treacherously, and holdest thy tongue when the wicked devoureth the man that is more righteous than he? And makest men as the fishes of the sea, as the creeping things, that have no ruler over them? They take up all of them with the angle, they catch them in their net, and gather them in their drag: therefore they rejoice and are glad. Therefore they sacrifice unto their net, and burn incense unto their drag; because by them their portion is fat, and their meat plenteous. Shall they

therefore empty their net, and not spare continually to slay the nations?

There's an anguish here. The logic is disjointed, almost like the emotional raving of somebody whose sorrow has deprived them of reason. But the overall thrust is pretty clear: "God, if you're who you say you are, then *why do the wicked prosper?* Because of the New Testament, and the fact that Christ called fishermen as his disciples, we're used to positive associations with evangelism and fishing. Here, in Habbakuk, the fishermen are diabolical agents. Their injustice ensnares the unsuspecting and helpless multitudes. The wicked and oppressive are so confident in their superiority, in their untouchability, that they have an almost reverent and religious attitude toward the instruments and systems of their long-reaching and highly effective evil.

"I will stand upon my watch," Habbakuk says, "and set me upon the tower, and will watch to see what he will say unto me, and what I shall answer when I am reproved." This is terrible stuff, and I don't mean terrible like Charles Barkley means it. I'm assuming that all of us have, at one point or another, had our disagreements, our questions, our moments of fist-shaking at God. But it takes a special kind of low to bring us into Habbakuk's place—the place where 1) we realize that things are entirely out-of-hand, 2) we are completely and seriously committed to finding an answer to the problem, and 3) we manage to do that with enough humility and openness that we are actually sensitive to a genuinely Divine answer, one that comes to us not through self-deception, through the static of our own grief or resentment, but from the source of all Truth, both about ourselves and others. To be genuinely open to God, really "to see what He will say unto me, and what I shall answer," is a rare and precious thing. Habbakuk is willing to go up into that tower. By-the-by, *that's what Advent is*. "Wake, awake, for night is flying, the watchmen on the heights are crying," we will probably sing in a few weeks. This is the musical language of our holidays, leading up to Christmas. "Wake, Watch, Lo, Hark!" This is the language of Advent. It's time to climb the watch-tower. And we should be prepared to be genuinely surprised, startled, confronted, and even rebuked when we receive the answer.

"And the Lord answered me," Habbakuk goes on to write, "and said, Write the vision, and make it plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth it. For the vision is yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak, and not lie: though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry." *That he may run that readeth it*. When we are truly open and listening, when we have stood upon the tower, with an attitude of watchfulness—we will realize something. God does not do philosophical argument. He does not give Ted Talks. When the answer comes, it comes in the form of a command, an injunction, marching orders, news for a herald to carry, not a proof for contemplation, but an invitation and a condemnation to be announced, and with urgency:

Behold, his soul which is lifted up is not upright in him: but the just shall live by his faith. Woe to him that coveteth an evil covetousness to his house, that he may set his nest on high, that he may be delivered from the power of evil! Thou hast consulted shame to thy house by cutting off many people, and hast sinned against thy soul. For the stone shall cry out of the wall, and the beam out of the timber shall answer it. Woe to him that buildeth a town with blood, and stablisheth a city by iniquity!

The answer that God gives first is a warning. The seeming prosperity of the wicked is, in fact, corruption. Does the house appear beautiful? Do the institutions appear stable? Does the system seem to function well? *The stone shall cry out of the wall, and the beam out of the timber shall answer it*. To sow corruption is, inevitably, to reap corruption. The craftsman is only as able as his tools, the builder

as his materials, the warrior as his weapons. Blood and iniquity may serve, for a time, as the foundations of a life, a city, or a society, but in the end, they will betray their origin.

Our reading from Habbakuk's prophecy this morning ends both abruptly and with anticipation: "Behold, is it not of the Lord of hosts that the people shall labour in the very fire, and the people shall weary themselves for very vanity? For the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea." We are given here two images, seemingly at odds. One is the image of a people who toil and sweat in the very midst of scorching flames. It's an image of Hell, but of one that we sense is undeserved. These are people, like the children of Israel in Egypt, who labor under hard taskmasters, whose sweat is mingled with their blood, who cry out in the night for a justice that does not seem to come. On the other hand, they are placed alongside those *who weary themselves for vanity*, that is, *for nothingness*. By these, we might understand those diabolical fishermen from the prophet's earlier complaint, whose bloody labor to build their bloody city on the backs of the poor and the oppressed is destined for self-destruction. Their worship of their own net, their self-confidence and self-exaltation against Divine justice and Divine Truth, is bound for failure. The answer of God to both sets of people—His condemnation of the oppressor, and His comfort of the downtrodden—is the same: *The earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.*

The knowledge of the Lord is not a simple matter of concepts and theories. It is a knowledge, as +Fr. Mark has often mentioned, that implies intimacy, like that between a man and wife, and it is inevitably a fruitful knowledge. It brings things into being that were not before. We see this on display in St. Paul's exhortation, which we read this morning from his letter to the church at Colossae: "For this cause we also, since the day we heard of your faith, do not cease to pray for you, *and to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that—in order that—ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power, unto all patience and long-suffering with joyfulness; giving thanks unto the Father; which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light.* The knowledge of God brings with it wholeness, spiritual health, inner conformity to the character of Jesus Christ, that first-born of the Father with whom we are now joint heirs. The knowledge of God is identical to that faith—that trust—that brings wholeness because of the power in Him whom we have trusted, that power which stopped the flow of a desperate woman's blood, which raised the daughter of Jairus from the sleep of death. These things are living types and symbols of that greater sickness, and that greater sleep from which God has called us, and is continually calling us through the gracious provision of His Son.

The season of Advent, which is shortly upon us, and the solemn joy of Christmastide, functions always as an invitation to ponder this mystery anew, as for the first time. It is an opportunity to recalibrate our spiritual perspective. But we must, like Habbakuk, take up the proper station. We must ascend the watchtower, and look out from there with the eyes of faith—a faith that has rejected the vanities of injustice and wrong, and looks eagerly to God for correction, for peace, for wholeness, for real and fruitful transformation, in short, for what the Holy Scriptures call "salvation." I would challenge you all, as I challenge myself, to begin making the ascent. Over the next few weeks, as we approach and prepare for a holy Advent, let's climb the tower. From up there, we may find that the rose blooming in the bleak midwinter is in fact a tidal wave, bringing the knowledge of God as a flood to fill our hearts and minds. + Amen.