

**Homily - Rev. Kevin V. Madigan**  
**Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel NYC**  
**December 9, 2018**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent Year C**

**Baruch 5:1-9; Luke 3:1-6**

In recent times we've come to hear a great deal about "ethnic cleansing," the forcible removal of a people from their ancestral homes and lands. This morning's first reading from the prophet Baruch reminds us that "ethnic cleansing" is not some recent phenomenon, but rather has a history going back at least 2,500 years. Baruch describes the rescue of his people from the program of "ethnic cleansing" of their day, the return of his people from their forced removal out of Israel to Babylon (present day Iraq). Now the fortunes of the Hebrews have been reversed; the lonely days of exile have come to an end. The vision Baruch describes is of a crowd of people, standing, looking toward Jerusalem, the place of their hopes and dreams, the place they had been forced to leave. They are exultant because they are about to return to their ancestral homeland. Everything will be as it once had been, so there is gratitude and anticipation for the future.

For the Hebrews this experience of exile and return, of defeat and triumph, became for them one of the most crucial experiences in their history. As a result of this experience of loss and restoration, they came to view life from a much different perspective than before. They came to see life as a gift, not as a given; they came to realize that nothing lasts forever; that what one has today can be gone tomorrow, so no blessing should be presumed or taken for granted; that the land they possessed was a gift of God's bounty, and not simply the success of their own making. We also have to learn those same lessons, sometimes the hard way—that it's not until we lose what we always used to have, whether it be our health, our loved ones, our job, whatever, that we come to really appreciate it. And, that if we get back what we thought we had lost forever, maybe it's only then that we truly learn to value those blessings

When the Hebrews returned to Israel from exile in Babylon, they came to reflect on the reasons for the great disaster that had befallen them: the loss of their land, their Temple, their king, and almost their identity as a people. They came to view the time of their exile as a period of chastisement sent to them by God. Prior to their experience of exile, they had thought they could live in opposition to God's will, as if life would continue to go on as it always had. Now, in hindsight, they see the consequences of their misdeeds, and they vow to set things right ever after. Never again, would they presume to count on God's bounty without doing God's will.

The returning exiles came to develop a "theology," their understanding of how they believed God worked, and this understanding would dominate the rest of their history. It would form the context and the framework in which many of the books of the Old Testament would be composed. It was not the best understanding—it was one that would be challenged and corrected by Jesus—and it came down to something like this, "Step out of line and God will punish you, so you better stay in line" They resolved to try to be "holy," just as God is "holy." But "holiness" for the ancient Jews was understood in a very specific way, viz., by separation, difference, uniqueness. To be "holy" meant to live apart from anything that could defile them. So, polarities were developed distinguishing the "holy" from the "unholy:" between all the elements of daily life that they considered to be kosher and non-kosher, clean and unclean, pure and defiled, sacred and profane, Jew and Gentile, righteous and sinful. Just as they had barely escaped being assimilated by the Babylonian while in exile, now, upon their return, they believed the rules of their religious practice would ensure that they would never be assimilated, by taking on the ways of their more powerful neighbors. They would preserve their unique ethnic and religious identity at all costs.

We are not Jews, so what does all this have to do with us? Today's Gospel with its reference to John the Baptist should begin to make some connections. The Gospel writer is very specific about recording the time of John's appearance. It was during the rule of a Roman governor and of a Greek-influenced puppet king. John appears on the scene at a time when the Jews are again in danger of being assimilated by the larger cultural forces around them, of losing their unique identity. But there is a big difference between the way John works and the way that Jesus will work.

John goes to the desert area outside Jerusalem, and has the people come to him. They have to leave their homes, their families, their place of business, their cities. They have to separate themselves from the environment that threatens to assimilate and absorb them, to contaminate them, and find their true Jewish religious and ethnic identity out in the desert, as their ancestors had done centuries before. John is described as wearing garments of camel hair and eating locusts and wild honey, strange attire and behavior that would remind his people of Elijah, their greatest prophet. Again, John's goal is to have them return to their traditions, and separate themselves from the corrupting, foreign influences all around them.

The ministry of Jesus is conducted in a much different style. Rather than have the people come to Him, Jesus goes to them, to their village squares, their synagogues, their homes, even the homes of those considered to be sinners. And as He goes, He questions much of the conventional wisdom of the age. He challenges the way that

they look upon God as an avenging judge, and instead He tells them to call God "father." He challenges the traditional loyalties to family, to wealth, prestige and religion. He would have them see these things as good, but not as "gods," not worthy of the allegiance of their hearts and minds and souls. His goal was that they might come to perceive the reality larger than that of family or clan, that they might see all men and women as children of the one God; that the pursuit of their own wealth might not blind them to the needs of their neighbors who had practically nothing; that the desire for respect from one's peers might not lead them to a life of show, of pretense and fraud; and that religion not become an end in itself but rather a pathway to God, available to all. He challenged their basic way of looking at life, that division of polarities; of us against them, and the judgmentalism that often resulted. He tried to teach them in terms of an exclusive "we" that reached from God the Creator to the most simple child He happened upon. He tried to show how to be in the world, but not of the world.

This Advent the task is given to us to do what John's listeners did, but to do with the spirit of Jesus, i.e., to step apart from where we find ourselves in society, and examine what's been going on in our lives, but to do this not in a spirit of separatism and exclusivism, of us against them, of who is better than who, of passing judgment. This is to be done in the inclusive style of Jesus, where we might examine ourselves to see whether we have in fact reached out as He reached out: to members of our family, neighborhood, workplace, or world. Remembering the experience the Hebrews after their exile, we might reflect on some of those blessings we have taken for granted, that we, too, could lose. Have we viewed them solely as our personal possessions, or have we looked to see how they could be shared? This Christmas we will celebrate God sharing His Son with us. As we look upon our own giftedness, how do we share our time, our treasure, our talents. This is the most genuine celebration of the Savior's birth.