

Peaceable Kingdom

As I have been winding down more than forty years of full-time employment, I've found it to be a very reflective time. I was really struck by how two of the speakers at the wonderful Trinity luncheon two weeks ago told of their first memories of me from the 1980s, after Raisin and I had moved to Davenport so that I could teach botany at what was then St. Ambrose College. As I've said before, we arrived at Trinity in 1983 and almost immediately began singing in the choir. It was only much later that we both became priests, and it seems a short ten years ago that I became the Dean of Trinity Cathedral. A lot of time has passed!

The passage from Isaiah that we heard this morning generates additional reflections. It always reminds me of my brother Richard, whom the family called Dick. He was fourteen years older than I and a gifted musician. One way he expressed that gift was to compose a Christmas card every year. He often wrote the words and always composed the music. We looked forward each Christmas to seeing what it would be. One year he chose today's passage from Isaiah as the inspiration for his text and set it to a haunting melody. Years later he created harmony for that melody and had it published. One of my most cherished memories was his presence at a Nova Singers performance in which we sang it.

The passage from Isaiah is beautiful. There are words of hope and challenge for a people who faced one crisis after another. Threatened by foreign invasion and ruled by weak leadership, they did not know which way to turn. Isaiah told them to return to the Lord. He promised that God would raise up a new ruler from the descendants of King David, one who would lead them in wisdom and truth and bring peace to the earth.

Early Christians saw Isaiah's prophecies fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He would be the Child who would usher in a new Eden, a place where even carnivores would become vegetarian. The wolf will live with the lamb and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. It makes me think of another work inspired by the eleventh chapter of Isaiah, the painting of "The Peaceable Kingdom" by Edward Hicks, in which people and animals look out as though the viewer has disturbed their tranquility.

St. Paul was certainly one who understood Old Testament prophecies as pointing toward Christ. In his letter to the church in Rome that was read this morning, we heard "whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope." John the Baptist was the first New Testament preacher of the one who was to come. Today we heard the classic identification of him with "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness," preparing the way of the Lord – another of Isaiah's prophecies.

In Advent we wait for the return of Christ, even as we prepare to celebrate his first appearance at Christmas. The Bible portrays the Second Coming in cosmic terms. The earth will be torn from its place. Our lives will be totally up-ended. And yet the One whose heart is Love will fill us with his radiance, with joy irresistibly flowing everywhere, like floodwaters covering the sea. God's love will be all-encompassing.

What wonderful yearning there is in Isaiah's vision! It's not "pie in the sky by and by," but rather a hope and a promise that this life is not the end, that there is more than what we see now. A time will come when all will be reconciled to God and to one another. That is the promise God gives us through Jesus Christ. Whether we like it or not, whether we believe it or not, it will come in God's time. The best thing for us to do in the meantime is to work for the coming of that peaceable kingdom. God will take whatever we do for the love of Jesus Christ, large or small, and raise it up on the last day, when the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. And now may the God of hope fill *you* with all joy and peace in believing, so that you abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

[Advent 2: Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12.]