

Personal Notes  
051204 Second Sunday in Advent 005B  
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Besides commemorating ancient traditional uncertainty, two other modern contemporary uncertainties characterize this Christmas Season. First is the uncertainty associated with an uncritical acceptance of the hierarchical administration of the Church. The use of hierarchy, "Father knows best," contravenes the best practices associated with running contemporary organizations, or as Eugene Cullen Kennedy words it, "Hierarchy has collapsed as a satisfactory map of the universe, of ourselves, of popular culture and of our church."<sup>1</sup>

Immediately, the issue of religious obedience, such as that of the Poor Clare nuns, arises. Monastic life is a special situation, wedded to hierarchy as an aspect of marriage to Christ. Marriage itself is a leveler between equals, something the current celibate hierarchy is abusing to the point of great scandal; scandal not found in nunneries.

Another, second, modern, contemporary uncertainty concerns the Incarnation, the feast of Christmas. The Incarnation celebrates God becoming human, joining the Faithful. The uncertainty arises because the Church celebrates the Incarnation at Christmas, not the Annunciation. The uncertainty political issue is abortion. If up to a third of all conceptions flush down the toilet, sometimes experienced simply as heavy menstruation, are the Faithful to assume that these organisms are human? This current assumption of the Church hierarchy causes me great pause.

While it may seem unseemly to include menstruation in Notes such as these, last Sunday the First Reading at Isaiah 64:4 did mention menstrual rags. The Lectionary used the euphemism, *polluted rags*. Sometimes overcoming hierarchal abuse of authority, such as mistranslating Isaiah 64:4, does make the presence of God known. Perhaps the hierarchy is making another mistake, for example relative to abortion.

The readings for this Sunday, the Second Sunday in Advent, begin with Second Isaiah, written about the time of the return from Exile, about 600 years before Christ.<sup>2</sup> In his poetic exuberance, Isaiah 40:4 proclaims "And the rough land will become a smooth land, the mountaintops will become a deep valley." That is the meaning.<sup>3</sup> The Lectionary translation is *every valley shall be filled in, every*

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Cullen Kennedy, "Bishops and the Beached Whale: They wait for signal from new pope, but bishops need to let hierarchical style die," National Catholic Reporter, October 21, 2005, page 12, col. 3, paragraph 1.

<sup>2</sup> Aelred Cody, O.S.B., "A Palindrome in Isaiah 40:4b: Allowing Restoration of an Original Reading," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 66, No. 4 (October 2004) 551, 559.

*mountain and hill shall be made low; the rugged land shall be made a plain ...* In other words, the presence of God will be known through overcoming difficulties. Isaiah 40:3-5 is about a new Exodus into a new promised land,<sup>4</sup> understanding the promises better as gifts from God.

Isaiah 40:1-2a contains a hidden difficulty in the Old Greek, which adds the word *priests*. The Old Greek proclaims that the priests are doing the comforting. Scholars generally agree that the Old Greek draws from the Hebrew, referring not to priests, but to other gods, something the Old Greek translator did not like. The Old Greek lacks the sense of divine council.<sup>5</sup>

There is another explanation for the loss of the language of the divine council from the Old Greek. Perhaps the Hebrew for *your God, O priests* was misread as *God, O priests*.<sup>6</sup> The Lectionary translation avoids the problem altogether, *give comfort to my people, says your God*. Trying to reach the original meaning of the ancient manuscripts can afford great difficulties and, in the process, make the inscrutable presence of God known.

This Isaiah 40:1 points back to First Isaiah 12:1. The problem is that in the late Eighteenth Century, scholars discovered that Isaiah came in three parts, First, Second, and Third. Recently, scholars in the late Twentieth Century have gone about developing a basic unity throughout the three parts; three authors, one unity. This *comfort* is also found in Isaiah 49:13; 51:3, 9; 52:9. Isaiah 52:9 is also used on Christmas Day.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Aelred Cody, O.S.B., "A Palindrome in Isaiah 40:4b: Allowing Restoration of an Original Reading," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 66, No 4 (October 2004) 551, 559.

<sup>4</sup> Carroll Stuhlmueller, C.P., "Deutero-Isaiah: Major Transitions in the Prophet's Theology and in Contemporary Scholarship," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 42, No. 1 (January 1980) 6.

<sup>5</sup> Steven James Schweitzer, "Mythology in the Old Greek of Isaiah: the Technique of Translation," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 66, No. 2 (April 2004) 226.

<sup>6</sup> Steven James Schweitzer, "Mythology in the Old Greek of Isaiah: the Technique of Translation," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 66, No. 2 (April 2004) 226.

<sup>7</sup> Richard J. Clifford, S.J., "The Unity of the Book of Isaiah and Its Cosmogonic Language," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 55, No. 1 (January 1993) 1.

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The guilt forgiven in Isaiah 40:1-2 is the guilt of 1:4, Isaiah before the Exile. The Lectionary is drawing the Faithful away from their sins toward the New Jerusalem, within their own hearts. The Divine council in Isaiah 40:1-11 reverses the decree of destruction in Isaiah 6.<sup>8</sup>

Psalm 85:9, *near indeed is his salvation to those who fear him* is about the presence of God at the time of difficulties. The prophecies of Advent carry at least two more types of God-presence difficulties. The first relates to what the original prophets meant. As difficult as it may seem, some of those prophecies went unfulfilled.<sup>9</sup> I think, for example, of Jonah angry with God for not destroying Nineveh as Jonah had prophesied. The second relates to how the New Testament and the Church reinterpret those ancient prophecies, departing greatly from their original meaning. Courage in the face of intellectual uncertainty, the Faith-reason for that courage, draws out the presence of God Almighty.

Manuscript difficulties continue, abounding in the passage from the Second Epistle of Peter. I count thirty-one critical marks. 2 Peter 3:10 first proclaims *the elements will be destroyed by fire* and, with this as a basis, proclaims that the Faithful *ought to be conducting yourselves in holiness and devotion* (2 Peter 3:11).<sup>10</sup> The difficulty with 2 Peter is not only with the words, but also with their meaning.

At issue is the prophecy of the Second Coming. Peter and Paul both expect that Parousia within their own lifetimes. In this age of astronomy, a phrase like 2 Peter 3:12, *the heavens will be dissolved in flames*, carries very contemporary meaning, for example with the results of a meteorite hitting the earth. Peter writes, not to worry, be *at peace* (2 Pet 3:13).

The Greek at 2 Peter 3:14, uses the passive voice for the Faithful *to be found*, rather than an active voice *to find*. These Notes follow an active approach to finding God, rather than a passive approach about being found by God. Peter tempers the passivity by encouraging the Faithful *be eager to be found*. Such eagerness is the emphasis in these Notes.

The Lectionary uses the occasion of the Second Sunday in Advent to present the First Chapter and the first eight verses in Mark. The passage puts meaning in the

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<sup>8</sup> Richard J. Clifford, S.J., "The Unity of the Book of Isaiah and Its Cosmogonic Language," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 55, No. 1 (January 1993) 1-2, 4.

<sup>9</sup> Randall E. Otto, "The Prophets and Their Perspective," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 63, No. 2 (April 2001), 234.

<sup>10</sup> Terrance Callan, "The Syntax of 2 Peter 1:1-7," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 67, No. 4 (October 2005) 636.

difficulty of homelessness.<sup>11</sup> John is in the desert (Mark 1:4). Jesus has nowhere to lay his head. When the Faithful acknowledged their sins, overcoming the evil in their own lives, God made his own presence known to them. *He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit* (Mark 1:8).

The American Historical Review for October 2005 reviews Home and Homelessness in the Medieval and Renaissance World, an edited work containing many scholars. Home is both a building and a place in the heart. The scholars study Renaissance Venice, Morisco Spain, colonial Peru, medieval Iceland, and Anglo-Saxon England. They found amazing similarities across the five cultures.<sup>12</sup>

The consistent themes are that home means much more than a dwelling because it implies and establishes a community. Homelessness means that the community is threatened and the reaction can be either to integrate the homeless or protect the community. For example, as a serene republic, Renaissance Venice tried to integrate the homeless. Morisco Spain, on the other hand invoked separation rather than integration eventually driving the Muslims into homelessness.<sup>13</sup>

The Spanish army wreaked havoc on colonial Peru, destroying about half of the native dwellings. Both native Indians and poor immigrant Spaniards were homeless together. In the final analysis, "home was ... where you were not an outsider, bereft of shelter, sustenance, conviviality, peace; you were not *The Wanderer*."<sup>14</sup>

Home for the Faithful, therefore, is not of this world. Both John the Baptist and Jesus were outsiders within their own human communities. The evil aspects of homelessness bring out the presence of God as home for souls. Consideration of homelessness suits the major theme for this liturgical Cycle B.

The theme for this Cycle B is that overcoming difficulties makes the presence of God known. The first difficulties in the liturgical cycle engage Christmas. Mark 1:2-3

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<sup>11</sup> Carolyn Osiek, R.S.C.J., review of Michael F. Trainor, The Quest for Home: The Household in Mark's Community, *the Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Vol. 64, No 4 (October 2002) 781.

<sup>12</sup> Louis Haas, review of Home and Homelessness in the Medieval and Renaissance World in The American Historical Review, Vol. 110, No. 4 (October 2005) 1240.

<sup>13</sup> Louis Haas, review of Home and Homelessness in the Medieval and Renaissance World in The American Historical Review, Vol. 110, No. 4 (October 2005) 1240.

<sup>14</sup> Louis Haas, review of Home and Homelessness in the Medieval and Renaissance World in The American Historical Review, Vol. 110, No. 4 (October 2005) 1240.

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points to Isaiah who comforts the Faithful about not worrying, because the loving God is in charge. 1 Peter 3:13 encourages the Faithful to *await new heavens and a new earth*. Psalm 85:8 is about God proclaiming *peace to his people* as they overcome those difficulties that lie in the path of the return of Jesus to the earth.

For more on sources see the Appendix file. Personal Notes are on the web site at [www.western-civilization.com/CBQ/Personal%20Notes](http://www.western-civilization.com/CBQ/Personal%20Notes)