The Prayer of the Goat

December 17th, 2017

3rd Sunday of Advent

Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice! Christ is coming. Once we begin following him, Christ comes into our lives every day. And he is coming into the lives of those who do not yet know him. Throughout the earth, the promise of Advent is repeated every day as men and women open their hearts to the good news that a Saviour was indeed born two thousand years ago, a Saviour who brought us salvation, redemption, sanctification, eternal life, light, wisdom, hope, peace, joy and love. God is faithful to His creation, and His faithfulness is made known through the Only Begotten Son, Jesus of Nazareth. These past three weeks we have been building an icon of the nativity with words, Sunday by Sunday, imagining the animals that gathered around the manger, and reading from the poetry of Carmen Bernos de Gasztold to find some symbolism and some meaning that we can ponder as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ. In the first week, we looked at the Prayer of the Donkey as we thought of hope. In the second week, we read the Prayer of the Ox, and contemplated the gift of peace. Today, as we read the Prayer of the Goat, we are invited to passionately rejoice! For the Son of God came to give us joy, pure and complete joy.

Not surprisingly, it is hard to find a nativity icon with a goat in it. For centuries, since the middle ages cast aspersions on the Caprinae subfamily of creatures, linking them to black sabbaths, devil-worship and the dark arts, the church has avoided the poor goats like the plague. Some of this dark imagery had roots in Greco-Roman pagan religion. The god Pan, the fauns and other semi-divine creatures often took on goat-like bodies or qualities. Some of this also came from the parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25:32, which is really only a line or two of text. It is barely a parable. Here, the emphasis is on the shepherd's work of separating—it is not really about the sheep and goats, and the whole parable is subordinate to a larger discourse on end times and judgment. It is not a diatribe against goats. There is no good biblical reason to doubt the loveliness of goats. On the contrary, there are many reasons to think of goats as beautiful, joyful and sacred creatures. In the Law, goats were one of the clean animals (Exodus 12:5), and the covering for the tabernacle was made of goatskins (Exodus 36:19). Goatskins, according to the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, were frequently the humble clothing of the prophets, saints and pilgrims looking for the city of God (Hebrews 11:37). In the old covenant, to make atonement for the people, the high priest would present two male goats before the LORD—one to be sacrificed, one to be allowed to escape into the wilderness, symbolically bearing away the sins of the people (Leviticus 16). In this sense, goats prefigured the redemptive work of Christ. Lastly, the horns of goats could be used to make the *shofar*, the sacred horn that was blown to announce the fiftieth year, the year of jubilee: "Then you shall sound the loud trumpet on the tenth day of the seventh month. On the Day of Atonement you shall sound the trumpet throughout all your land. And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his property and each of you shall return to his clan. That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you; in it you shall neither sow nor reap what grows of itself nor gather the grapes from the undressed vines. For it is a jubilee. It shall be holy to you" (Leviticus 25:9-12). The coming of Christ into this world is a jubilee for the earth, as Jesus himself proclaimed at the synagogue in Nazareth at the beginning of his ministry (Luke 4:14-30). Thus, I think we can rejoice with the goats today and hear Carmen de Gasztold's prayer of the goat in good faith. It is likely that in the crowding of Bethlehem during the census of Quirinius, all kinds of animals got mixed together in the caves, barns, and other buildings of the town as people returned home to register their names, pay their taxes, share their goods, and perhaps even try to sell some of their wares.

Goats have long been associated with freedom and joy. Psalm 104 says, "The high mountains belong to the wild goats" (Psalm 104:18). Carmen de Gasztold takes up this theme in her "Prayer of the Goat":

Lord, let me live as I will!

I need a little wild freedom,

a little giddiness of heart,

the strange taste of unknown flowers.

For whom else are Your mountains?

Your snow wind? These springs?

The sheep do not understand.

They graze and graze,

all of them, and always in the same direction,

and then eternally

chew the cud of their insipid routine.

But I—I love to bound to the heart of all

Your marvels,

leap Your chasms,

and, my mouth stuffed with intoxicating grasses,

quiver with an adventurer's delight

on the summit of the world! Amen.

At first, the prayer of the goat seems a little selfish. The goat wants to live his or her own way and wants "a little wild freedom." The goat accuses the sheep of not understanding—they just chew their cud for eternity in an insipid routine. I do not think the goat is mocking the Christian virtues of being quiet and faithful to the Lord, but I think the goat offers a critique of a way of faith that banishes joy, charisma, passion and the enjoyment of God. Søren Kierkegaard warned his contemporaries about losing their passion, writing: "Although the demoralization brought about by autocracy and the decay of revolutionary periods have often been described, the decay of an age without passion is something just as harmful, though, on account of its ambiguity, it is less obvious" (Søren Kierkegaard. *The Present Age.* Tr. Alexander Dru. New York: HarperPerennial, 2010. 38). When religion becomes a routine of duties, a series of boxes to check off, a list of ideological axioms, a social engineering project, a club with rules, or a just a commercial venture, it ceases to be about God or human beings. The apostle Paul warned the Galatians of slipping back into slavery, saying: "Now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?" (Galatians 4:9); "For freedom Christ has set us free" (Galatians 5:1). For freedom Christ has set us free, and to be free is to rejoice in the Lord and His gifts.

In the lectionary reading today, Paul encourages us to rejoice: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil" (1 Thessalonians 5:16-22). The rejoicing comes first, for all of our virtues flow from the joyful love of God, the love He gives to us and the love we show Him. Paul's list of exhortations can be thought of as a recipe for joy. To pray without ceasing. To give thanks in all situations in life. To not quench the Spirit and not despise the words of the prophets. To test everything and to hold fast to what is good. To abstain from all evil. In short, to walk in the light. In sermons, it is easy enough to say that we quench the Spirit when we stray from the word of God, when we do not test things, when we do not abstain from every form of evil, and that is true. Have we ever thought, however, that perhaps we can just as easily quench the Spirit when we have no passion to rejoice, no passion to give thanks? I recall a criticism that my father once gave regarding a youth who was barely making an attempt to do some work for him. He said that he did not mind if people made mistakes at work, or failed at something. Mistakes can be fixed; failures can be followed by successes given time and practice. What bothered him most was when people did not work with joy, trying their best to give 150%. As time wears on, I am inclined to agree with him. I fear that this lack of joy often infects the social landscape of our faith. What does the world see in Christianity today? The world sees anger and fear—the anger of the political and social divides, the fear of our fate as a people of faith, the fear of what unleashing the good news might bring, and the worn-out righteous anger that seems to have little righteousness left in it. The harshness of the criticisms we level against each other. The insipid cud-chewing of all our talks about faith, compassion and openness to others, when in reality we are not excited about the kingdom of heaven at all; we can barely remember the language of that kingdom or the name of its King. Because we do not rejoice. Because we do not love. And yet, on the eve of receiving his crown of thorns, Jesus said: "If you keep My commandments, you will remain in My love, just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and remain in His love. I have told you these things so that My joy may be in you and your joy may be complete. This is My commandment, that you love one another as I loved you" (John 15:10-12). Are we ready to be bold, to dare, to live that ancient faith that teaches: "Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy" (James 1:2)? And Jesus himself said, "Very truly I tell you, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy. In that day you will no longer ask me anything. Very truly I tell you, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete" (John 16:20-24).

The goat wants the "strange taste of unknown flowers". Likewise, we should desire the unexpected gifts God wishes to give to us. The goat wants to live as it wills. And perhaps, we too should desire to be ourselves before God. To find out that we can only live as we will and be ourselves when we have shrugged off the world and its mortality and have reached for the heights of God's mountains. The goat prays, "For whom else are Your mountains? Your snow wind? These springs?" The goat senses the giftedness of God's creation—its whole prayer is a prayer of praise and thanksgiving translated into deep desire for God's gifts. And the goat is hungry for the goodness of God, for the deep things of God, calling out: "I love to bound to the heart of all Your marvels, leap Your chasms, and, my mouth stuffed with intoxicating grasses, quiver with an adventurer's delight on the summit of the world!" I have heard preachers in the past disparage the mountain top experiences. Perhaps in an effort to teach humility or hard work, they want you to get back into the valley of shadow as fast as you can, get back to boring reality and be the model citizen society wants you to be, someone like W.H. Auden's "Unknown Citizen":

He was found by the Bureau of Statistics to be

One against whom there was no official complaint,

And all the reports on his conduct agree

That, in the modern sense of an old-fashioned word, he was a

saint,

For in everything he did he served the Greater Community.

Except for the War till the day he retired

He worked in a factory and never got fired,

But satisfied his employers, Fudge Motors Inc.

Yet he wasn’t a scab or odd in his views,

For his Union reports that he paid his dues,

(Our report on his Union shows it was sound)

And our Social Psychology workers found

That he was popular with his mates and liked a drink.

The Press are convinced that he bought a paper every day

And that his reactions to advertisements were normal in every way.

Policies taken out in his name prove that he was fully insured,

And his Health-card shows he was once in hospital but left it cured.

Both Producers Research and High-Grade Living declare

He was fully sensible to the advantages of the Instalment Plan

And had everything necessary to the Modern Man,

A phonograph, a radio, a car and a frigidaire.

Our researchers into Public Opinion are content

That he held the proper opinions for the time of year;

When there was peace, he was for peace: when there was war, he went.

He was married and added five children to the population,

Which our Eugenist says was the right number for a parent of his generation.

And our teachers report that he never interfered with their

education.

Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd:

Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard.

"Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd". Indeed, the modern secular world has made joy and passion absurd, but Christ calls you into that very absurdity; He calls you out of the boring traps and pitfalls of the everyday. Christ does not expect you to live every day in the valley of shadow. Jesus only lasted in the tomb three days! Christ calls us to be goats, to dance on the heights, to eat the strange unknown flowers of rejoicing in the gifts of life, of freedom, of joy. May our nativity icons of the future never lack a goat or two, for the goat announces the jubilee of God, the time of joy and redemption.