Of Stars and Distant Shores

1st Sunday of Advent

December 1st, 2019

Once upon a time, a North African, a Syro-Phoenician, a Roman Centurion, and some Greeks tourists found something in common. In the Gospels, they have Jesus in common. A North African helped Jesus carry the cross on his way to Calvary (Mark 15:21); the daughter of a Syrian woman was healed by Jesus (Mark 7:26-30), as was the servant of a Roman centurion (Matthew 8:5-13). As for the Greek tourists, we only know that they sought out Jesus not long before his death (John 12:20-23), on an occasion when the heavens thundered with a divine voice. Though Jesus directed his disciples to preach first to the Jews and Samaritans, and thus let the good news radiate like a ripple effect from the place of his ministry, death, and resurrection, from the beginning it was clear that the Son of Man “will draw all people” to himself (John 12:32). Indeed, this is the season when we proclaim that “the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world” (1 John 4:14), that God “desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). In a land never visited by the apostles, in a land that even Marco Polo only knew by hearsay, I came to know this Lord and Saviour, and I came to love the church that gave birth to the men and women of faith from all over the earth, whether we speak of the apostles from Galilee and Judea, the apostle Paul of Tarsus—Pharisee, Roman Citizen and greatest spokesperson for the faith, the possibly Macedonian evangelist Luke, the martyrs of Rome, the great theologians of North Africa—Origen from Egypt, Cyprian and Augustine from Carthage, John of Damascus the Syrian, John Climacus of Sinai, John Cassian who likely traveled from the Balkans to France, Ambrose and Boethius and Cassiodorus of Italy, Patrick a slave from Wales who preached to the Irish, the Anglo-Saxon Bede who loved books in a largely illiterate land, Alcuin the Saxon who founded schools during the early dark ages of Charlemagne’s empire. It was a church in which a Spanish friar named Domenic would have a tremendous impact on Germans such as Albertus Magnus and Meister Eckhart; in which Thomas Aquinas, himself of Italian, German, and French background, could speak of a universal church. In this church was born the spiritual genius of northern women like Hildegard of Bingen and southern women like Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Avila. In this church, Sorghaghtani Beki, a Kerait princess and mother of Kublai Khan, emperor of one of the greatest land empires in history, was a devout believer, a builder of churches, and one of the most powerful women on the earth in her time. It is the church of Portuguese sailors and Japanese samurai, African kings, Chinese merchants and statesmen, Korean resistance fighters during the Second World War, French mountain folk hiding Jewish refugees, Coptic martyrs giving their lives during the dark days of persecution in our own time. It is the church of Black Elk of the Lakota and Henri Membertou of the Micmac people. The oldest Christian artwork in the Americas was made by Aztecs in Mexico City. Even in modernity, this trend has not abated. This is the faith and the church of the Japanese novelist Miura Ayako, Russian dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Indian Canadian apologetics scholar Ravi Zacharias, Ethiopian spiritual director Matthew the Poor, the Scottish brothers who founded Mary’s Meals and feed almost a million children a day around the world. On seven continents and across five oceans, the words of the Saviour still inspire and save. Our Saviour indeed draws all people to Himself.

For this reason, this Advent I want to make a pilgrimage through some of the oldest texts of this church, texts written on different continents by people of different nations, as they looked forward to the Saviour who will come again, the Saviour who was born in poverty and died in misery, but who rose again in glory.

Our first poem is *A solis ortus cardine* by Coelius Sedulius, a 5th Century Irish Christian. It speaks of hope as something awakening, our awakening to the comforting fact that our God has become one of us:

From east to west, from shore to shore,

Let ev’ry heart awake and sing

The holy child whom Mary bore,

The Christ, the everlasting King.

Behold, the world’s creator wears

The form and fashion of a slave;

Our very flesh our Maker shares,

His fallen creatures, all, to save.

All glory for this blessed morn

To God the Father ever be;

All praise to thee, O Virgin-born,

All praise, O Holy Ghost, to thee.

The blessed morn of Advent dawned when our God was born as a vulnerable baby; our salvation began in the humblest of circumstances. Indeed, the entire appearance of the Christ from his baptism to his resurrection and ascension, were like a new morning for the world. The world would never be the same again. The spirit of Advent, then, is a spirit of waking up, of shaking off the nightmares of darkness and sin, of opening our eyes to the light of a new hope in a new world, the new heaven and new earth that is being prepared for us by the Saviour who will come again. This wakefulness or vigilance is a virtue, a virtue highly regarded by the early Christians. Thus, the apostle Paul tells the Romans: “Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day” (Romans 13:11-13).

Our faith is a faith of looking forward to God’s blessing and understanding our current blessings in the light of the goodness that is to come. Jesus is the light that illuminates past, present and future, the light that animates us and motivates us through time into eternity. Ignatius of Antioch, an early Syrian Christian, wrote a poem about our hope in his *Letter to the Ephesians*:

A star shone in heaven

Brighter than all the stars

And its light was ineffable,

And its novelty caused astonishment;

All the other stars

Together with the sun and moon

Became a chorus for the star

And it outshone them all with its light;

And there was perplexity as to whence came

This novelty so unlike them.

Thence was destroyed all magic,

And every bond vanished.

Evil’s ignorance was abolished,

The old kingdom perished,

God being revealed as human

To bring newness of eternal life

And what had been prepared by God

Had its beginning.

Though the Word made flesh had no beginning as we understand beginnings, Christ is the eternal beginning; Christ the Morning Star is portrayed as celestial light of “novelty” so unique compared to anything else, bringing a “newness of eternal life.” Ignatius, however, does not leave this event in the dust of history. Instead, this event has “its beginning”—it continues to this day, it continues into the future. To hope is to embrace this beginning and newness. It is the ultimate vigilance, an opening to the miraculous and the profound, the great things that God will enact. For this reason, Jesus said: “Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming” (Matthew 24:42). Christ is coming. One of the first people to understand that Christ is coming was actually speaking to him at the funeral for her brother. Martha, much maligned by obnoxious biblical scholars, professed a profound faith that has made me pause and ponder many times. Staring Jesus in the eyes, who is alive and well and present only a few feet in front of her, she says: “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world” (John 11:27).

Our poems today are expansive. They invite us to think beyond the narrow confines of our lives and see the work of God “From east to west, from shore to shore” (Coelus Sedulus). They invite us to look heavenward and see the newness of the Morning Star, “Brighter than all the stars

and its light was ineffable, and its novelty caused astonishment” (Ignatius of Antioch). Advent literally means that something or someone is coming. This Advent, I invite you to journey into the kingdom of light. I invite you to consider following this Morning Star Christ. The greatest gift you could receive this season would be the coming of the salvation of Jesus. If you have not already given your life to Christ, come this season, and give your life to Him. Come and be baptized and set out on an adventure, a journey of continued newness and astonishment at the grace and love of God who came to us to become one with us, that we might become one with God. The spiritual experience of Advent is something like being in the arrivals and departures sections of an airport at the same time. As we embark, Christ arrives, as we draw near to God, God draws near to us. Christ was born that we might be reborn. May all of us awaken to God’s presence, to God’s hope, made known through “Christ, the everlasting King.” Amen.