

November 29, 2009

The First Sunday of Advent

Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

The Rev'd Geoffrey M. St. J. Hoare, rector (preacher)

Changing Direction

You may have heard of Marjora Carter. She is host of a show on Public Radio's called "The Promised Land" and also one on the Sundance Channel called "Eco-Heroes". She has been named one of the twenty-five most influential African-Americans by *Essence* magazine and is a 'Genius Fellow' of the MacArthur Foundation. What she did that led to these opportunities and accolades was founding and heading something called "Sustainable Bronx"¹, an organization that takes an approach to justice that integrates human, ecological, environmental and cultural sustainability² in addressing policy issues affecting one of the poorest congressional districts in the country. (It is not unlike the 'transition town' movement³ originally out of England but now international and growing in this country and might be helpful to us as we begin to think about the future of this city block on which we sit in the middle of a growing metropolis. Marjora Carter said something really compelling in her remarks to the Trinity Institute at the beginning of this year (January, 2009). She said: **"As far as I'm concerned, people need three things to be whole: someone to love, something to do and something to look forward to.** If any one of these things is missing, the other two suffer—and in communities like mine, at least two out of the three are hard to come by."⁴ That is pretty good: someone to love, something to do and hope for the future. It is what we want for these children we are baptizing today and it is what they are offered in a life of faith: love, mission, purpose in life. Through the spiritual practice of this community of faith --and I mean 'this community' or any specific incarnate, chosen community where there is no substitute for showing up as the most fundamental spiritual practice rather than some generic idea of Christian Community that requires no commitment—through the spiritual practices of this community of faith, (showing up for worship, generosity, service prayer and so on) we are offering the newly baptized the capacity to develop an internal compass and to determine a true direction in

¹ 2001-2008

² "Sustainable South Bronx is a community organization dedicated to Environmental Justice solutions through innovative, economically sustainable projects that are informed by community needs. In 2001, SSBx was created to address policy and planning issues like land use, energy, transportation, water, waste, education, and, most recently, design and manufacturing" from the website: <http://www.ssbx.org/index.php?link=2>

³ <http://www.transitiontowns.org/>

⁴ Marjora Carter "Greening the Ghetto" in *The Anglican Theological Review*, (Fall 2009, Vol. 91, No 4) p.602

life. It was one of the Greek philosophers who noted that ‘a sailor with out a destination cannot tell an ill wind from a fair one.’

For many of us finding these three things—someone to love, something meaningful to do and hope for the future—is a pretty good summary of the salvation for which we long. The children baptized today, like most if not all of us, will spend time in the wilderness. Sometimes they will find it a lonely or wild or threatening place. At other times that wilderness will be a proving ground and they will emerge stronger for it. In any event, they, like we, will be looking for a sense that they have arrived; hoping that the sense of being a soul in exile will come to an end and that the promised land of real love and real meaning and real purpose is theirs after all.

At one point or another they, like we, will find ourselves looking for a sense of direction, a way toward that Promised Land, a way home. *Direction* is important for faith and important for life. We are subject to misdirection in all kinds of ways. Many of you know that I am a sometime amateur magician. Misdirection is essential to the art of magic and essential to making things look and seem other than they are. Magicians in the many theatres of our lives including in our own imaginations are always offering illusions, beautiful tricks, the promise that we can have it easy, consume without consequence, find value in material well-being and so on. Salvation is that gift of sight by which we begin to see things as they are and help each other see ourselves and the world as God’s sees us: creatures of infinite potential, made by Love for Love.

We can see things one way for much of our lives and be unwilling to be persuaded that we have been misdirected in some way. It took a couple of hundred years before we could cope with the idea that the earth revolves around the sun and that we are not therefore the center of the universe. We are still unclear about the theory of evolution and in large part due to how we have been taught to read and hear the Bible. I am among those who have been misdirected about today’s reading from Luke. I have heard so often about the Son of Man ‘coming with the clouds’, have sung that marvelous hymn that begins ‘Lo, He Comes With Clouds Descending’, and along with much of Christendom have assumed that this dramatic imagery all points to some kind of prophecy of a second coming of Jesus. But scholars are now coming to a new consensus that the apocalyptic imagery of Jesus and the prophets is not that complicated. It is a literary convention (and everyone knew it then as now), --a literary convention used in various ways for various purposes. In the mouth of Jesus it is used to talk about justice in the here and now. The Son of Man is a figure from the book of Daniel (Chapter 7 in particular). He is a representative figure who will bring the story of Israel to its climactic conclusion. When the Son of Man appears, the enemies of the people of God will be decisively defeated and the true people of God in the person of the Son of Man will be vindicated. ‘The time is now’ says Jesus. Your exile is coming to an end and the righteous will be vindicated when the entire world can see what really matters. The word often translated as ‘coming’ has the sense of ‘coming’ or ‘going’, and our rather literal images of Jesus returning the

way he left, coming feet first through the clouds as it were, are quite the wrong direction for vindication. Look at our gospel reading a different way. We start by talking about the heavens as the setting for the signs, and it is *into the heavenly realms* that the Son of Man is coming in a cloud toward the heavenly host among whom he will be cheered and vindicated.,⁵

Apocalyptic is pretty simple in this light. God is about to act. The exile will finally be over and the true people of God will find their true home. The promise of salvation is even now being fulfilled. It is the language of hope and it offers us true direction, living toward what matters. That is the message to those whom we baptize and to every one of us on this Advent Sunday, the first day of our year: someone to love, something to do and a reasonable and holy hope for the future are available to you even now, even when you do not entirely feel it or believe it. When your heart's desire and God's desire for you are aligned, you will know the end of exile in your life. This is the promise of Advent prophecy and I wish you a very happy New Year.

⁵ See N. T. Wright articles http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_BR_Farewell_Rapture.htm or discussion in *New Testament and The People of God* and *Jesus: The Victory of God*