

November 28, 2010

The First Sunday in Advent

Matthew 24:36-44

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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

Our Father

There is a lovely story of one of our Bishops attending a Presidential Prayer Breakfast a few years back. One of the people chairing the meeting asked the Bishop to "lead us in on of his *written* Episcopalian prayers." To which our Bishop responded, "Why certainly. Will you please join me? *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name....*"

The Lord's Prayer is an Advent Prayer, a prayer filled with future possibility and a prayer that is prayed with at least one eye toward the final fulfillment of the promise of the gospel. It begins with a reminder that God is God and we are not. God is personal and holy. God is both near like a parent and far as one in heaven. But the Lord of the Universe is not simply one being among others. God is the source of all that is.

Jesus lives with this awareness, especially, it seems, when he is looking to the fulfillment of the promise of the Reign or Rulership of God. *About that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.* This year, and every third year, Advent begins with this reminder that the areas of life over which we have anything resembling control are limited and contingent, for in the end God is God and we are not.

Have you ever found that life is just simply out of control? I know many of us will feel that as we try and manage this season of preparation for Christmas. And if not in the getting ready, then in the paying the piper when the bills start rolling in. We find ourselves out of control when we fall in love or when someone we love gets a really bad diagnosis. We find ourselves out of control when feelings that come out of some deep place in our lives and our history start taking over against all reason: when we start listening to criticism and feeling inadequate even though we know better; when we angry with no one to blame and we start spiraling into depression; when we find ourselves gripped by panic for no apparent reason and we believe that no one can really understand or help. At such times we are out of control.

The question is 'how do we --as people of faith--- respond to that sense that we are not in control?

Fair Game is a good movie and is the story of Valerie Plame, the covert CIA operative who was outed by Scooter Libby and others in apparent retaliation for her husband's writing an Op-Ed piece for *The New York Times*. His name was

Joe Wilson, a career diplomat, who believed that President Bush was maneuvered into creating a case for the invasion of Iraq on at least one false premise. The story is horrifying as we see the consequences of political point-scoring on the lives of Plame, her family, her marriage, and perhaps worst of all, her 'assets', particularly within Iraq who were either murdered or otherwise went missing. In the movie, the experience of being out of control while your life is turned upside down is a matter of injustice. In most of our lives the experience is more circumstantial, but the effects are just as devastating if we allow them to be.

Those of you who have worked the twelve steps of various twelve-step programs know that one of the greatest battles we have to fight is the battle with pride-- imagining that we can exert control over things that we, in fact, cannot and do not control. Just as common is our basic instinct that is sometimes called 'fight or flight.' In the face of challenges that seem insurmountable we are likely to want to beat our heads against a wall on one hand or completely give up on the other hand. In the movie, Naomi Watts who plays Valerie Plame, tries flight -- notably flight from her marriage and her husband's campaign for some kind of justice -- before coming to terms with who she really is and turning to fight for her marriage, her life, her children and her identity.

For us, coming to terms with the reality that God is God and we are not is not so much a matter of fleeing or fighting, either being like those who imagine that the conversation has no relevance for them or their lives on one hand; or joining the 'new atheists' who seem to be able to make money by rejecting notions of God that we probably reject as well. No, coming to terms with Our Father, who art in heaven, whose name is hallowed, means more sorting out when and where we *do* have influence and proper control over our lives. Above all that area is in the freedom we have to choose our response to the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

The Lord's Prayer teaches us something about our response as well. From the recognition that God is God and we are not, we move to need and even to thanksgiving. *Give us this day, our daily bread. Forgive us our sins. For thine is the Kingdom, the Power and the Glory.* What we control is our capacity to recognize and respond to the circumstances of our lives recognizing our ultimate dependence on God for all that makes for life: daily bread, forgiveness, the capacity to praise and, above all, the gift of love.

This is the terrain we will be covering in these Sundays of Advent this year as we consider the prayer that Jesus taught us, and allow it to shape the way we see what really matters and return to give thanks for the blessings of this life. Valerie Plame was able to recover her love for her husband and the importance of her marriage and she returned to take hold of those things that were within her grasp and her ken. We, when we look around us, can begin to see those places in our lives where we do have choice and where we do have a measure of control of our own reactions. We can choose kindness and make for peace. We can cry out for justice and we can act in love -- even when we don't particularly feel like it. And

we can perhaps begin to see grace in small things like bread and wine, returning to give thanks for the source of all that makes for life.

As ever let us pray in silence and in response to the gospel, perhaps considering our regular prayer: *Our Father in Heaven, Hallowed be your name....*