

Advent I Year C

THE SECOND COMING

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
 The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
 Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
 The best lack all conviction, while the worst
 Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
 Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
 The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
 When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
 Troubles my sight: somewhere in the sands of the desert;
 A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
 A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
 Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
 Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.

The darkness drops again but now I know
 That twenty centuries of stony sleep
 Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
 And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
 Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

These prophetic words were written just after world war one. Yeats wrote this, perhaps his most famous poem, around the same time in which T.S. Eliot wrote the Wasteland...two prophetic works of art depicting a deathly new age, an age of despair and violence, of chaos...the order of the cosmos shaken at its very foundation...Eliot called this world death in life... For Yeats as you just heard him describe it, the world is a world of violence and anarchy in which none of the old paradigms of order stood any longer, a world governed now by impassioned depravity... In less than a month and we will arrive at the darkest time of the year, the winter

solstice...and in such a time, such a season, the world's darkness feels more poignant...indeed studies show that anxiety and depression spike at this time of year.

And to be sure the darkness of our world is real and presses upon us....poverty and violence and famine and indignity permeate our world.... addiction is pandemic in the developed world, most especially in our own country....the disparity of wealth worldwide is growing exponentially...we hear everyday of the so-called fiscal cliff over which we are about to tumble... The Middle East, the tinderbox of the possibilities of either peace or violence with worldwide ramifications, is becoming increasingly unstable... the planet has perhaps passed the tipping point of being saved from the devastating effects of global warming....the universe shaken at its foundations.

Yeats the poet/prophet, not that there is any difference, saw a coming age in which its inhabitants had lost contact with its moral soul: "the falcon cannot hear the falconer" he writes...and indeed in just a couple of decades world war two broke out in which over 70,000,000 people were killed.... 70,000,000!, punctuated by the detonations of two nuclear bombs. Luke in the gospel reading for today, not unlike Yeats, is taking on the mantle of prophet...the same prophecy occurs in Mark and in Matthew. Luke as the other synoptic writers are doing, is using the language of the apocalyptic genre so popular in his age, a violent age of imperial occupation...an age of fear and uncertainty, of wars and rumors of wars....he depicts a phantasmagoric scene, just as the modern and postmodern poets do of a world violently falling apart....and indeed, such is the cycle of history according to Rene Girard, former professor of Anthropology at Stanford who has written dozens of books arguing that with no exceptions new ages, new civilizations are wrought in violence, perhaps the flight or fight gene still operative in our collective DNA.

But in spite of the dire tribulation to come that Luke holds up before us, he doesn't leave us hopeless, and therein is the golden thread of the 'good news'...the world is falling apart he tells us, but that there indeed is a second coming at hand, and this second coming, according to God's promises since time immemorial is the return of love to the world...and according to our holy lore that can only mean that our redemption, our rescue from the yoke that oppresses us, whatever that yoke may be that enslaves us....that when the cycle of violence, fear and indignity comes

round; the good stands tall and raises its head against it, because we know in sure and certain hope that our rescue is forever at hand...and Luke gives us a hint as to how to trust such a hope...he tells us to look at the signs...the world of nature his metaphor...probably over the millennia the best metaphor of all, the most authoritative in art...he tells us to pay attention to the signs...when the fig tree and other trees put out leaf we know that the world is being renewed...He bids us pray, but by prayer I think what he means is for us to be mindful of the signs of truth all around us...remember, the apt definition of prayer being the 'art of paying attention'...Look, brothers and sisters, look for the love that lives and moves among us. It takes many forms. Look for it. It is surely there, bearing light and warmth in a cold and dark world. Somewhere on the internet I ran across a story of a policeman buying boots for a homeless man he encountered on the street... so simple, but such love unravels the dark in ways that have exponential potential....such love is contagious.

We...Katharine, Rhett, my mother and I returned from San Antonio where our granddaughter was baptized, my mother's great granddaughter... This year for a number of reasons has been one of the more challenging ones for our family...at lunch after the baptism, I was sitting next to my son James, the proud father, our firstborn...now James' and my relationship has always been an affectionate one; we hug and kiss...but this moment was different...without warning or being prompted he put his long slender arm around me and held it there firmly for a time...as if reaching across generations...neither of us said a word...I felt a flood of love, not in my head, but in my body, and I felt the peace and the peculiar liberation from the anxieties I carry around that love brings with it...love the liberator...It was a sign, I am sure...a sign that love is real, that love endures, that love can be trusted...and that love will overcome with all due grace the darkness that threatens us.

During this season of Advent watch for the signs of love in our world, be mindful of them for they are surely there to give us unshakeable hope for the way ahead...Be watchful with raised heads, for the signs will lead us through the dark into new life in quite unexpected ways, and we ourselves might be unwittingly one such sign... Watch and wait friends of God; our redemption, love that liberates... is at hand.... That is a promise.