

SERMON: 2018/12/23 (4th Sunday of Advent, Yr. C) - Jeremiah 31:4-9a; Psalm 113:1b-9; Hebrews 10:5-10; and, Luke 1:5-38a _BTR

[Invite children to the front. Have a tambourine ready.]

In these - the last few days before Christmas - it can be very hard, sometimes, to contain all of your excitement; to be *patient*.

And sometimes life can feel like a never-ending waiting-room of delayed gratification - we might feel stuck "in a rut;" like we're missing out on good things, which seem to be always coming on the horizon, but never really arrive.

Well, Jeremiah - the prophet - was sent by God to the Jewish people - Israel - at a time when there was *never* Christmas - because Christ hadn't come yet!

Can you imagine that?!

No Christmas - *ever*.

His audience were feeling *pretty* sad indeed.

How would you feel if Christmas never happened?

[Wait for response.]

But Jeremiah said(!): "*take [out] your tambourines*" and have a party!

[Suddenly shake a previously concealed tambourine.]

Why?!

"For there *shall* be a day when [God will fix everything]."

We just need to wait for it: it *will* happen.

He has said so!

It is, then, only a matter of time.

We just need to *trust* Him.

Let's pray: Father God, ..., in Jesus' name, amen.

[Ask children to leave.]

On Wednesday morning, a small, white car pulled quietly up outside of St. Matthew's.

It was one of those cheap, Asian makes that no one quite recognizes: was it a Honda or a Hyundai?

I couldn't tell you.

Probably neither; something even more obscure.

It was battered and rusty; the paint was peeling.

And from it emerged two women.

Their faces both told a similar, *hard* story - of difficult lives full of struggle and disappointment.

And they came in the hope of food.

"Have you any, Father?"

"We're very hungry. And she's got three grand-kids and 'nutha baby on the way."

"Of course!" I exclaimed.

Rebekah, who had been helping me prepare some props for this afternoon's 'Nativity Service', came up from the basement with four loaded grocery bags:

"It is an odd selection [of things]," I warned.

"Some cereal and pasta, soup and some apple-sauce. ... But no milk I'm afraid."

"Oh, weaze gots milk," she reassured me. But this is gonna be a big help."

"Oh, well I'm glad that I could help!" I replied.

"I'm just sorry that there isn't more that I can do for you."

"Well, actually," she said, "there is: what about ya heater?"

"My heater?" I repeated.

"Yeah, yah heater."

She pointed to the small, shiny black one that sits in my office.

It wasn't especially expensive.

But very effective!

There's" - she pointed to her companion again - is a kerosene one, and the whole house stinks of them fumes. It probably isn't any good for the baby."

"No, no - I see."

Did I?

In my mind's eye I pictured a dilapidated trailer, full of holes with the wind whistling through. And three children, huddled; inhaling a thick, oily air with every breath.

And as I did my heart sank:

"Yes, I suppose you could have mine... I guess."

"Oh no," she now feigned in protest.

"We couldn't."

"Of course you can." I insisted - now feeling rather embarrassed at the reluctance she probably had heard in my voice, if only for a moment: "*You must!*"

"Oh, okay. Can you put it in the car for us?"

"Right away," I assured her: and bent to coil up the cord and unplug it from the wall.

And I've been cold ever since!

(No, that's not true: Rebekah went out, like, immediately and bought me a replacement.)

But did I do the right thing?

There are those who argue, perhaps with some justification and evidence, that

we, in the (affluent) West, have created an underclass - an underclass *conditioned* to receive welfare and to do little else: that repeated charity from the government and other agencies has enculturated the poorest of the poor to be, *principally*, consumers of *others'* productivity and resourcefulness, and *dis-*inclined to "liberate" themselves from undignified cycles of dependancy; that *every time you give you (only) increase the likelihood that the same person will ask again.*

And, *for this reason*, a "wise" person - one who would say that "they understand 'the ways' of the world" - might withhold charity, and claim a larger, far-sighted moral principle for doing so; that, fundamentally, by this, they are helping in a more important manner - by changing behavior.^[n.1]

And I see some "mileage" in such a way of thinking *if* it is sincere as opposed to a cynical, self-serving facade to excuse one's selfishness.

The Church's mission, after all, whilst, undoubtedly, it involves offering *material* support for - to quote *Jeremiah* - 'the blind and the lame' - to - quote the Psalmist, now, King David - "lift" 'the needy from the ash heap'.

Also only sees these problems as (merely) *symptoms* of man's intrinsic fallenness - our waywardness - our insistence on disregarding God's authority and replacing it with our own, which is why it puts the *Spiritual* Battle front-and-centre - the priority before other priorities.

And so the *first* thing that we're asked to do isn't to rush around *doing* good, but, rather, to make our first task to 'believe' - and to ask others to 'believe' too: 'believe my words', says Gabriel to Zechariah (in the Temple).

The idea is that, when we concentrate on this, everything else begins to fall into place; that we find that we're going *with* "the grain of the universe" - that's the title of a wonderful book by the (famous) Christian ethicist, Stanley Hauerwas - (going with) *The Grain of the Universe*.

But the call to *believe* first and "get busy" later can seem, to others, like foolishness; like an unreasonable request and expectation.

"*Just get on with it!*", the unchurched cry.

"Show us something we can measure and quantify."

And yet look at the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary: initially, *believing* alone, (with nothing else to go on); *believing* in God despite the seeming *injustice* of the (Divine) request - her context, remember, was very much like Afghanistan under the Taliban:

to be pregnant and unmarried was a *death-sentence*, and if your neighbors didn't stone you "on the spot" they almost certainly ostracised you - *thrusting* you to the margins, *shunning* you.

Her condition in 1st century Palestine was a *disgrace*; a *great* shame.

The *sensible* thing to do would have been to take a quiet, night-time trip to the

village abortionist. That's what an upstanding religious couple would have done for the sake of their honour - and that of their daughter's livelihood:

To be unmarried in ancient Israel was a *miserable* existence - this is why the Old Testament places such stress on giving aid to "widows and orphans." [See, e. g.: Deut. 14:28-29, 26:12]

These social groups had the most dreadful life outcomes.

And no *good* Jewish man would ever marry a woman like Mary - a single, *pregnant* adolescent.

So, for Mary, obeying God's 'word' was to take a risk - a risk that practical people; *reasonable* people wouldn't take.

And yet we're asked to the same.

Let's take a moment to reflect.

Footnotes:

1. This is, for example, an important part of the argument in the following widely acclaimed work: Fikkert, Steve and Corbett, Brian (2012), *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor*, Chicago, I. L.: Moody Publishers.