

2nd SUNDAY OF ADVENT – C (December 6, 2009)
Fr. Jerry Kopacek

Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas, Caiphas—quite the list that Luke gives us in this gospel, isn't it? All these names and the places mentioned serve as the historical background on which Luke brings John the Baptist on the scene. Of the four gospel writers, St. Luke is the one who was most concerned about getting the history and the details straight: at the beginning of both his gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, he clearly states his intent to relate faithfully and truthfully the story of Jesus. That attention to detail explains all those names, places and times in our gospel today—he wanted his readers to know precisely when and where John the Baptist preached his message of repentance and preparation for the Lord's coming. I have told you before that I'm kind of a history buff; when I mention that in my school visits, some of the students will look at me in disbelief (as if to say "who could possibly be interested in history?"). It was a favorite subject for me when I was in school and I ended up getting a double major in history along with political science in college. Even back then I was what might today be called a bit of a history nerd-boy.

But Luke and the other gospel writers were really on to something in their focus on history. Their purpose was to preserve and hand on to future generations the truth about God and man, our relationship and our ultimate destiny—and that could not be done without doing some history. And they came to that focus on history very naturally: their foundation was Judaism—that faith that is grounded precisely on the reality of the one true God who revealed himself to specific individuals (Abraham, Moses, King David, and so many others) in specific places at specific times in history.

The prophets of the Old Testament spoke frequently about the history of God's up-close and personal dealings with his people. They challenged the people when they forgot God and went their own way, and they also tried to reassure the people in their sufferings. Our first reading today is an example of the latter: the prophet Baruch (closely connected with Jeremiah) lived about 600 years before the time of Jesus at a time when the Israelites were conquered by king Nebuchadnezzar and were taken captive to Babylon. Baruch knew that sad history as did the people, but he assured them that God would restore Israel and bring his people back to Jerusalem. And history indeed tells us: that is precisely what happened.

Even more so is our Christian faith necessarily a matter of history. Years ago one scholar wrote that Christianity (with its Jewish roots) "is the only religion which actually depends entirely upon history." In the sense that religion is concerned with the divine, how we are connected to the divine and what we are about, that statement is completely true. Other religions in the world (e.g. Buddhism and Confucianism) have long histories and traditions of wisdom and ethical insight that the Church respects and holds in esteem. Islam professes a belief in the one true God who called Abraham to be the father of many nations. But only Christianity makes the bold (some may say 'audacious') claim that that one true God is also Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and that God the Son entered into our human, historical world of time and space. And the centerpiece of that earthly, historical reality is what is represented on that powerful crucifix that is above our altar. The scholar I mentioned earlier also said that Christianity "is Divine redemption given from within history...by the wrenching of one Man's flesh and the spilling of His blood upon one particular square yard of ground, outside one particular city gate during three particular unrepeatable hours, which could have been measured on a clock."

You know these things, of course, and you may well be wondering why I keep repeating what seems so obvious. One reason is that there is a persistent if not growing desire to minimize or even eliminate the specific, concrete, historical nature of Christianity as being based on the flesh and blood Jesus born of Mary, dead on a cross, and risen from the grave. Many these days advocate or at least tolerate a Christianity that is little more than an ethical philosophy, that all that is needed is we should be nice and

respectful of others. Obviously, there is nothing wrong with that; indeed we are called to a genuine love and respect for everyone. But there is nothing uniquely Christian about love and respect—other religions hold those virtues in high esteem as well. This is also related to the often-heard claim that all religions are basically the same, that they are just different ways of saying the same thing and getting to the same place.

While those who say such things may have good intentions, however, it is simply not true to say that ‘all religions are the same’. We certainly neither judge nor condemn anyone for their beliefs, but reality and history compel us to affirm the utterly unique nature of Christianity. Our Christian faith is completely and necessarily centered on the person of Jesus Christ—the utterly unique Son of God who transcends human history but who nonetheless became part of and entered into human history. And because Jesus took on our human nature and entered our history, he as both God and man is able to relate to us, teach us, challenge us, forgive us and love us in ways never before known or even imagined. It is that flesh-and-blood Jesus, that incarnate God about whom John the Baptist preached and for whose coming he prepared the people. And it is that flesh-and-blood Jesus whose reality is not just 2000-year-old history, but continues in our own time and place and history. The Church which Jesus established is the uniquely important locus of that historically-revealed word of God in its fullness in Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition. The sacraments, especially the Eucharist and reconciliation, are the ongoing presence of Jesus’ strength and forgiveness in the world and in each of us. And history—Christian and otherwise—will come to its end and its fulfillment at the end of time when Jesus will come again in the fullness of his divinity and glory.

You don’t all have to be history nerds like me; you don’t have to memorize all those tetrarchs, those names and places that Luke mentioned in the gospel. You students in our schools, history doesn’t have to be your favorite subject. But if we call ourselves Christian and wish to be authentic disciples of Jesus Christ, we have to be firmly grounded in its historical reality, truth and nature. As that scholar also said: “You cannot (and you never could) enter into the truth of Christianity apart from its history.” Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God, born of Mary, died on a cross at Calvary, rose from the dead, and will come again. Jesus entered into our history and thus became the Lord of history. May this Advent season remind us of this most important of all history lessons so that we prepare ourselves for his coming at Christmas, every day, and on the Last Day.