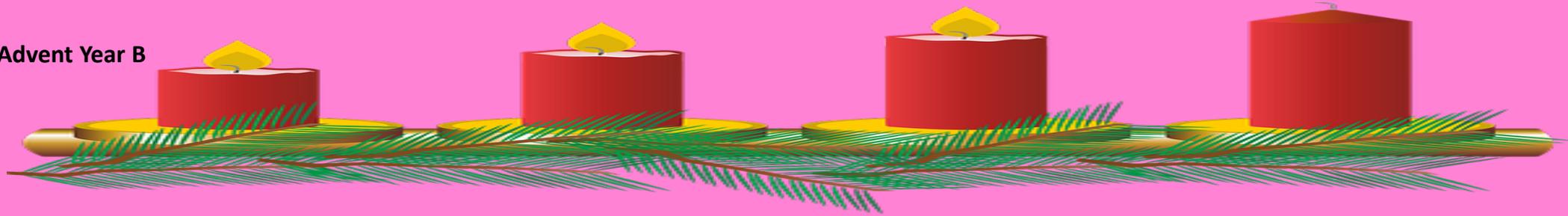


Reflection for 3rd Sunday of Advent Year B



It was announced earlier this week that Pope Francis plans to visit Iraq from 5th -8th March 2021 as he continues to preach the Gospel in a land where the Catholic community is relatively small. In many respects, it echoes his call to go to the peripheries, to the less well-known areas of Christianity. His vision is that of a less Eurocentric Church as he continues to build on the themes that he developed in his recent encyclical letter “Fratelli Tutti”. He further announced that there would also be a year dedicated to St. Joseph to celebrate 150th Anniversary since St. Joseph was declared patron of the Universal Church. In doing so, he has written an apostolic letter “Patris Corde” [with a Father’s heart] to commemorate such an occasion. These appear to be an attempt by Pope Francis to encourage the Church to look beyond the current pandemic and to offer people throughout the world a renewed sense of hope. The timing of both these announcements is probably a reminder to us of the season of Advent, a time of hope as we wait patiently for the events of the Christ-child to unfold as we make our way, somewhat cautiously this year, to the stable at Bethlehem. The pathways to God are rich and varied, and at times unknown, but they encourage us to reflect on our faith in a new and perhaps creative way as we try and make sense of it in and through the pandemic. This year, Advent has in ever sense of the word become a new Advent as we have had to find different ways of expressing this liturgical season as it grapples and gets to grips with the ongoing implications of the effect of the virus, throughout the world.

For many of us, there was a sigh of relief that we would be returning to Tier 3 and an easing of restrictions as we approach the Christmas season. We are being advised to be cautious, to think about whom we interact with so that we don’t give the virus an opportunity to spread. That is going to be difficult and sometimes we can let our hearts rule our heads. The human struggles, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually make it hard for us to make sense of the virus which we cannot see but the damage we can see. Those who have lost their jobs; those suffering from a reduced income or an uncertain future all form part of a struggling Advent that many people are experiencing today. The human question, “Where is God?” is for many people a reality. Therefore, as we continue as pilgrims in Advent, perhaps the following words by Ronald Rolheiser, a contemporary spiritual writer may encourage us to keep going to Bethlehem so that we can celebrate the Saviour’s day:

“But wrestling with God has another aspect. It invites us to a certain kind of prayer. Prayer isn’t meant to be a simple acquiescence to God’s will. It’s meant to be an acquiescence, yes, but a mature acquiescence, one come to at the end of a long struggle.

We see this in the prayers of the great figures in the scriptures: Abraham, Moses, the apostles, Jesus. Abraham argues with God and initially talks him out of destroying Sodom; Moses at first resists the call, protesting that his brother is better suited for the job; the apostles excuse themselves for a long time before finally putting their lives on the line; and Jesus gives himself over in the garden of Gethsemane only after first begging his father for a reprieve. As Rabbi Abraham Heschel, one of the leading Jewish philosophers and theologian of the twentieth century, puts it, from Abraham through Jesus we see how the great figures of our faith are not in the habit of saying “Thy will be done!” but often, for a while at least, counter God’s invitation with “Thy will be changed!”

Struggling with God’s will and offering resistance to what it calls us to can be a bad thing, but it can also be a mature form of prayer. The Book of Genesis describes an incident where Jacob wrestled with a spirit for a whole night and in the morning that spirit turned out to be God. What a perfect icon of prayer! A human being and God, wrestling in the dust of this earth! Doesn’t that accurately describe the human struggle?”

Ronald Rolheiser, OMI “Wrestling with God: Finding hope and meaning in our daily struggles to be human,” pages 128/129