

The Inner City of Joy

Advent III, Gaudete (Rejoicing) Sunday, December 15, 2019

If you had a choice, would you rather live in:

A City of Hope.... or A City of Despair?

A City of Peace.... or A City of Discord?

A City of Joy.... or A City of Sorrow?

A City of Love.... or A City of Hate?

It's a ridiculous question on the face of it. **Who wouldn't** rather live in a city of hope, peace, joy, and love? It's just common sense.

And yet, it is the pressing question of the scriptures in Advent. And there, in the scriptures, it goes "quite a ways" beyond common sense.

Because we learn in the scriptures that – in addition to the many "outer," physical cities, like Jerusalem, Babylon and Rome – there is also an "inner," spiritual city, called "The City of God."

It's a City that is real – a City that is present, here and now – but a City that we cannot see with our eyes or touch with our hands – because it is located within our hearts and minds. Within it, lies the Temple, or House, of God – the "Holy Place" where God lives, within us.

The Hebrew prophets called this sacred "inner" City, "**Zion**" (after the great mountain on which Solomon's Temple was built.) But **"this"** Zion was built **"within"** the Israelites. And so, **wherever they went....., there it was....**

It was always "in their midst," always accessible. They could go to this "inner" City of Zion, and abide there with God in its Temple, even when "outwardly," "physically," they were stuck in hostile territories like Egypt, Assyria, or Babylon.

It was their abiding in this "inner" Holy Place that led them to say strange things that defied common sense – like, *"In the presence of mine enemies....., Thou preparest me a table; Thou anointest my head with oil; And my cup runneth over. "*

The early Christian saints – the writers of the New Testament – spoke of Zion as the "Place" within us where the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit dwell.

The early Christian saints speak of Christ as the precious "Cornerstone," set in the foundation of Zion. And they tell us that this "inner" City is our true home, where our true "citizenship" lies.

Interestingly, Jesus never used the word "Zion," at least not in the teachings we have recorded in scripture. And we're not sure why. Maybe he saw the word "Zion" as being too "tied" to the physical geography and culture of the Jewish people, while his "Good News" was not an ethnic, but a universal, message. We don't really know.

But throughout his ministry, Jesus was constantly teaching on this "inner" City of God. He called it "the Kingdom." He taught that "the Kingdom" is

- not a visible, physical, earth-bound place; but an invisible, spiritual "place;"
- not a time-bound place, but a place "outside" of time (or eternal.)
- not merely a future Heaven – a City we'll only discover *"when time is no more"* – but a City that is already & always present within us & within our midst

"Outwardly," we may live in the city of Sarnia or Nazareth, Belfast or Beirut. But we all have access to this inner Holy City. It was *"built in"* to us all – *including non-believers* – by virtue of our creation in the Image of God.

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But we are modern people. So we have to ask: *"If this City of God is not a 'physical' city – but an invisible 'place' within us – then.... isn't it just... 'imaginary' ?"*

Sadly, in much of our modern culture, if something is not "real" *in an observable, physical sense* – then it is just "imaginary," just... "pretending."

But within cultures of faith, just because something is "not physical" does not mean it is not real. After all, the most important things in life – like love & hope & joy – are invisible.

And so it is with the Kingdom, the "inner" City of God, the "place" within us all where the invisible God dwells. To be sure, the Holy Spirit inspires and makes use of our imaginations, our reasoning, and our emotions – to *"take us"* to this Sacred Place within – but it is a **real** Place. It's just "not physical."

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So **how do we get in** to this wonderful "inner" City of hope, peace, joy, and love – this Sacred Place within us all?

Strangely enough – as we heard this morning in Isaiah's poem about Zion – we enter this Holy Place within us by **confessing the truth** of where we are at in our lives.

When we confess that we are *parched, like a desert* – the streams of living water flow.

When we confess that we are *arrogant, like a mountain* – we are humbled, made low, like an open plain.

When we confess that our minds are a “mess,” full of debris & frenzy, *like a jackal's den* – they are cleaned up and reorganized into places of clarity & peacefulness.

When we confess the truth of where we are at in our lives, we suddenly find ourselves "there," in Zion, in the Kingdom, in the holy, "inner" City of God, being carefully attended to by the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. And, then, our confession changes key.

It becomes a Confession of Joy, like Mary's *Magnificat*. A Song of Rejoicing about how we have been inwardly "lifted up;" how we have been inwardly "fed with good things;" how our inner "rough places" have been "made smooth;" and how our way forward in life – that inner "Highway" of God – has become clear.

Remember: when Mary is singing her *Magnificat*, her feet are firmly planted on the physical soil of Nazareth – a very troubled city. And she herself is in a very precarious circumstance (as an unwed, pregnant young girl.)

But, at a soul-level, Mary is standing in Zion – in the "inner" City of God – within its Sacred Temple – expressing the Joy of God's transforming work within her.

Mary sings of Joy – not to deny or escape her life in Nazareth – but because her life is inwardly grounded in Another City, which (although it's invisible) is very real. And within it, God is turning her sorrow into joy.

Each of us already possesses this same Holy City with its Sacred Temple that Mary found. It's already & always within us.

(But, still, it's true – we can't deny – that in our world, and at times within our own lives – this Holy City seems to be a "Lost City.")

This is the "problem" – and the "hoped-for-solution" – of Advent.

The "spiritual homework" God gives us in the Advent Season of our lives is to seek & find – to confess & rest -- within this inner Sanctuary, our inner House of Prayer. For before we can bring "*Joy To The World*" around us, we need to experience God's Joy within ourselves.

Now, how can we get started on "spiritual homework" *like this*?

A simple thing I find helpful is to **stop** understanding "prayer" as just something I "do" or "say" – and to **start** understanding "prayer" as a "place" that I go to.

A "place" where God is already & always waiting for me – with Love, Forgiveness, Wisdom, and Joy – with everything I need.

A "place" of healing and transformation.

A "place" I can't find on my own, but the Holy Spirit will take me to.

All I have to do is open up, and "be real" – be honest – about where I'm at right now. And, before I know it, I'm "there."

So you see, we **do** have a choice. We can live in Sarnia or Camlachie or Brights Grove and (*at the same time*) live in Zion, the City of God. We can dwell in its Sacred Temple. Inwardly, we're all "Children of Zion." Our truest citizenship, our closest Friends & Family, are there.

We can go to this inner Holy Place anytime, anywhere, even with our eyes wide open.

I won't be so crass as to say – "*Try it! You'll like it!*" – but **do go**.

Let's all go to this inner Holy City. **Let's all** spend time in it's Sanctuary.

There we can find the real Joy of Christmas (*even before December 25th!*) And we may even decide we never want to leave.

Thanks be to God.