

**Homily - Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of St. Thomas More NYC
December 16, 2018**

3rd Sunday of Advent Year C

Luke 3:10-18

After reading this morning's Gospel I can't help but think that John the Baptist must have been a little surprised, maybe even disappointed in the way that Jesus turned out. John spoke of the coming Messiah in such terms as, "His winnowing fan is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn in unquenchable fire." John's vision is one of judgment and doom, a rather severe prospect for the future. Yet Jesus, in His ministry, arrives as a much different kind of Messiah—one who is reconciling, not judging; forgiving, not condemning; inclusive, not exclusive. The vision, the perspective of John is too much lodged in the past, still too stuck in the Old Testament's anticipation of a day of doom, to be prepared for the kind of Messiah that Jesus proved to be. In fact, we read in the Gospels how, after Jesus had begun His ministry and John was in prison, John sends his disciples to inquire of Jesus whether He is indeed "the One Who is to come." John seems to have some reservations about the way Jesus is conducting His ministry. In short, John's dream for Israel was not so large as God's dream for humanity.

Today we might spend just a few minutes to reflect on the capacity to dream, i.e., to risk imagining alternative possibilities, as an essential element of the Christian life. And how this ability to dream serves to lift us up beyond the limits that our doubts and fears, our cynicism and lethargy, would impose upon us. Perhaps the reason Jesus was rejected was that He showed a face of God so different from the one that people had painted of God. They could not dare to dream that God was revealing in their midst.

Someone once said, "All men dream, but they do not dream equally; some dream with their eyes closed, but others with their eyes wide open." This second kind of dreaming is the gift of imagination, the ability to improvise, to rearrange and readjust the humdrum leftovers of life into surprising fare for ourselves and others. This other kind of dreaming brings buoyancy, resiliency and hope. It provides the freedom to release a person from the deadness of the past, the energy to face a different kind of future. We are all continually confronted by obstacles, by disappointments, by our own failures. But if we can dream, if we can imagine another way, then, like a circus clown, after we fall, we can get back on our feet and begin all over again.

I often hear people say, "that may be well and good, but we have to live in the real world." What may I ask is the "real world?" Often enough, isn't it just the accumulation of the inertia of the past; the residue of false compromises, of cloaked hostilities and dishonest truces; the immobility, the sameness, the fixed agendas that too often characterize our lives? If we cannot imagine anything better than what we've got, then the "real world" is at heart a false world that can seduce and enslave us. The "dreamer" is the one who sees through what passes for the "real world" to a "better world."

We live in a violent era; we live in times that seem to have exhausted creative solutions. It may well be that violence is due to a lack of imagination; that violence takes over when dreams have died; that in situations of entrapment and despair the only way out may seem to be violent way. Looking at the incredible rise in teenage suicide in recent years, we see the self-inflicted violence of those who saw no other way out from the pressures of school, of family, of friends that they were suffering-- those young people, whose depth of experience was so limited, that they thought what they were going through at that moment would go on forever, that things could never be different, certainly not better. Sadly, the words of St. Teresa of Avila, "this too shall pass away," are not found on the cover of any rock album. So, despairing of life, these young suicides were drained of any vision, of perceiving any alternative to death.

Then there is the man or woman who may feel just as trapped by the boardroom or senselessness of life, who likewise can't imagine things can be any better, any different. He or she may find their escape by a chemical path, becoming more and more dependent upon some drug or alcohol, but whose ultimate destiny is again death, but here by a slower route. This is death in small doses; this is death on the installment plan, but still a violent, self-destructive death.

Not quite so dramatic but just as deadening can be the failure to envision any alternative in the midst of a relationship between two people, wherein a tacit agreement to leave whole areas of the relationship undiscussed and unhealed may be a sign that any hope of a change for the better has died. A veneer of civility can hide deep alienation when people no longer invest their energies in sounding out the possibilities of some rapprochement. Harold Pinter, the playwright, writes that, "In a marriage it is not those things unknown that go unspoken that can destroy a marriage, but those things that are known and, nonetheless, go unspoken." Once again imagination has ceased to be employed in the service of love

"Dreamers," because they can imagine alternative situations, are always dangerous and therefore suspect. As far back as the book of Genesis, we have the

story of Joseph who was sold into slavery by his brothers because they said, "He is a dreamer," because he saw things that they could not see. In our own era, we have the witness of Martin Luther King Jr. who preached, "I have a dream," who said we should be governed by our dreams, more than our fears; who said that compassion was more valuable than any ideology; who envisioned a restructuring of rights and opportunities for all people; and who dared to take the Christian message out of the sanctuary of a church into the corridors of power.

We have the example of Jesus, God's dream made flesh. It is He of Whom it was said, "Behold I make all things new." It was He who held out to his listeners a new vision of God and of themselves; who embodied that vision in His own behavior and the behavior He encouraged in His disciples; who formed around Himself a community of those who caught the spark of His dream, and wanted to dream along with Him; who was nailed to the cross because His dream was entirely too much for most of them; but who was raised on Easter Sunday to reveal to us that the "foolishness of the cross," the refusal to dwell in what passes for the "real world," is the entrance into His dream, into God's reality.

In these days before Christmas, as we prepare to celebrate the birth of the Messiah, as we recall that Jesus was born in the deep of winter, in the dead of night, when all hope seemed spent, we realize that Christ can be born in us as well. That with Him, we can have the courage and hope to live out our dreams, to dare God's dream for us, to be lifted up from the entrapment, the lethargy, the pressures of the everyday, to do something new, to be someone new in the year that lies ahead.