

Advent 4

There was a picture in the paper yesterday of a child sitting on Santa's lap and she is trying hard to hold back her tears. I didn't read the story—if there was one—but parents understand such a scene immediately. Something went wrong. What should have been a joyous event turned into a crying session. Maybe the little girl was frightened by Santa's beard. But I am sure that as soon as her mother or father saw that things were not going well, they jumped into action. A visit to Santa would have to wait for another year. Now it was time to take her away to some other place that would please her. An ice-cream store might do the trick.

Tears or no tears, we are now in the baby season in the church's liturgical year. Liturgists tell us that Advent is the time when the Church looks forward to the coming of Christ in a twofold way: first as the child born in Bethlehem and then as the final judge at the end of world history. But we all know that for most of us the first coming of the Lord seems to be on our center-stage while his second coming as judge of history lingers in the background.

Of the four Gospels only two, Matthew and Luke, give us any material about the Lord's birth and early life. Mark and John, on

the other hand, began with a full-grown man setting out on his career. And Luke gives us much more than Matthew. Matthew devotes his first and second chapters to these early stories. In ch. 1 he tells us about the genealogy of Jesus, tracing him back to Abraham and to King David. So Jesus comes from a royal family, but since all people were said to be blessed in Abraham, Jesus also is seen as the savior of the entire human race. Then Matthew tells the story of Jesus' virginal conception, clearly wanting us to know that Jesus is the son of God in a unique way. In his second chapter Matthew's story grows darker. The Magi come seeking the child, and when Herod, the local Jewish ruler, hears of this, he is afraid for his throne and orders the children around Bethlehem under two years of age to be slaughtered. Joseph, fearing for his child's life, flees to Egypt. So the holy family is a model for people like the people at our southern border today. They too were people seeking safety in a new land.

But it is Luke who is the source for our celebration of Christmas. He is the one who gives us the scene of the birth of Jesus in a manger in Bethlehem. He is the one who tells us about the shepherds who are guided by angels to the manger. He also gives us the stories about angels appearing to Zechariah and to Mary to tell them about God's plans. The angel Gabriel tells Zechariah that

his wife Elizabeth, who is older and childless, will have a son and this son's destiny will be to prepare a people fit for the Lord. Then Gabriel appears to Mary to tell her that the Holy Spirit will overshadow her and she will bear a son, indeed the one called the Son of God.

When we hear of the angel Gabriel appearing to Zechariah and Mary, some of us are tempted to walk away mentally. "That is not my world," we say to ourselves. That is a very understandable reaction. We don't meet angels every day. But we have to remember that we are dealing with extraordinary moments in human history. Here is God entering into human history in an absolutely unique way. Oh, yes, we are all unique. But this uniqueness concerns God's will to become part of human history. In the fourth and fifth centuries our church tried to understand and express who it believed Jesus was and is, and it ended up saying that he is both God and man, and in one. We confess that faith when we recite the Nicene Creed. But if we tried to express it in our own language today, we might end up saying something like this: Jesus was a man so open to God that God could take total possession of his personality. And looking at today's second reading from Hebrews, we could say that Jesus was open to God because of his will and the actions resulting from his will. Thus in

our second reading today from the Letter to the Hebrews we hear Jesus say to the Father: “Behold, I come to do your will.”

We humans are complicated creatures. Someone has said that almost all of our actions are not simply the expression of one thing, of one wish. We might be doing one thing, but there are probably many reasons why we are doing that one thing. But, despite this complexity, it is also safe to say that we all have a fundamental orientation in our lives which gives them their fundamental tone or character. True, sometimes we step out of character. We do something which does not correspond at all with the fundamental tone of our lives. If we are usually good, then this action will be a bad action, a sin. But, thank God, is the exception.

We are concentrated on the baby Jesus these days. But we know that he is going to grow up and learn that his Father, God, is calling him to a huge task: to overcome evil by suffering it, by remaining good in the face of it. And he was called to do that the way we all are, through our will and through the actions to which our will gives birth, and therefore through our bodies. Thus we read in the Letter to the Hebrews today: “By this will we have been consecrated through the offering of the body of Jesus Christi once for all.”

May our wills be directed to the Lord, thereby giving our lives their fundamental character. And may we not be too quick to presume that angels are not acting in our lives. They have many names besides Gabriel.