

O Come, O Come Emmanuel

December 02, 2007

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

Matthew's Gospel (24:36-44), which you just heard speaks of an Advent, which not many of us choose to contemplate. The illusions Jesus makes to Noah and the images he takes from life in Palestine, the men in the field and the women at the mill and the burglar all share a common theme which is the coming of the Son of man. That is the *second coming* of the Son of Man. When we look closely at this Season of Advent, it becomes apparent that God comes into our world and lives in *many* ways. He comes as creator, teacher and revealer; he comes as judge and master into our history; he comes into the Church to cleanse it and give it new direction as needed. But, the *supreme* coming of God is his coming into our lives as one of us.

A learned Bishop once likened the Season of Advent to a *Divine Invasion*, a phrase which at first glance may seem somewhat out of place to describe how God comes to us. But, then the coming of God is at *His*

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will and on *his* terms. If he comes at all he comes in ways mysterious and unpredictable to us, and always on his own initiative. He comes like a thief in the night; he comes like a man returning from a journey and demanding an accounting from his servants. He comes like a storm. The Biblical images of God's Advent are almost always like these....images of a sudden, arbitrary appearance outside of our own calculations all together. Some of us, as children, used to play a game called *hide and seek*. There is something of that in God's coming. We were never quite ready when the person who was *IT*, the seeker, finished counting, but he came anyway. We are never quite ready for *God's* coming but he comes anyway. He comes when he wills. So perhaps the word *invasion* is a good one after all. God invades his creation. He acts and moves among us and within us at his own initiative, on his own purposes. Even that most tender and loving coming of God in the birth of Jesus has the same arbitrary qualities about it. The

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time and circumstances of Christ's birth were of God's choosing, not ours. We are confronted by Jesus, not because we are ready, but because God is ready.

Why is this coming of God in Christ of so much greater significance than his coming in the many other ways in which he comes? We can only see this from our side. We can only try to imagine what is in God's mind about this, but through our knowledge of ourselves, and our understanding, however slight, of the nature of God, three suggestions come to mind for this greater significance.

First, we, you and I, are at the center of our own problems. The separation from God, the disorder in the creation, the confusion in human affairs, *all of this* is, first of all in our own hearts. If we ourselves were all right then we could cope with disorder. As we understood more, as God revealed more of himself and his will, we could put human history right. But,

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the root of the problem being *within* us, knowledge alone is not enough. And until we are right, no amount of knowledge and no amount of manipulation of the world outside ourselves is going to be enough.

The second suggestion is a little more complicated. Why *are* we a problem? The answer is that we are creatures of free will. We live, we know that we are morally responsible, in other words, that we are obliged to choose in favor of right and very often do not, and so it is that our separation from God grows out of misuse of our freedom and our wrong choices. In this we can only be put right from within.

The third suggestion for this greater significance of God's coming in Christ is still more involved. It involves asking the question *why our* freedom matters to God at all. Why did he make us creatures of free will, having to choose, instead of making us marionettes on a string? Why did God limit himself by

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making it possible for us to disobey him? It might be that what God was after, in creating us the way we are, was something more than a doll could give. The one thing he could not get from a puppet is an answer: an understanding, eager, loving obedience that is really more a partnership. Even God cannot command love. The price God pays for love freely given is freedom itself, with all the possibilities of disobedience that comes with it. This is the essence of love, that it is freely given. God loves us enough to allow us to choose, to say yes or no. It is in saying *yes* that we respond in kind, yet we are perfectly free to say no. The point is that we are saved through our freedom, not in spite of it. Our final joy is not in losing our choices, but in making the right choice.

This is the wonderful story that begins in Bethlehem in the birth and childhood of this man. From that beginning the story goes on with mounting intensity to the supreme climax of Calvary. Every step of the way

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is marked by choice. Every step of the way he is faced with every test and temptation we know. To him, as to us, life comes with all its glitter and rush of opportunity and invitation, and like us, he must choose what is truest and best that life offers. And he must do it from the same limitations that we know. He is a particular person, born at a particular time, living in a particular part of the world, facing the particular choices that his generation had to face and more. We have the example of Christ who in perfect tranquility and perfect freedom shows us the ultimate end and purpose of being free....that is to offer ourselves in loving, understanding obedience to the Father from whom we came. So, far from being servitude, obedience becomes that service of God, which, as the Collect for Peace says *is perfect freedom*. The ancient prayer of the people of Israel, *O Come, O Come Emmanuel* is still the Advent Prayer for us when we remember that God in Christ *did* come. Emmanuel, God with us, came to be a *new* and *living* way for *free*

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people to follow. We are offered this partnership and the way and it's never too late.

AMEN.