

1st Sunday of Advent

Alexander was bishop of Lincoln, England, in the early twelfth century. He led an ostentatious and luxurious lifestyle. To distinguish himself from Alexander the Great, he had people call him Alexander the Magnificent. His contemporary, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, led a more austere life at his monastery in France, but they knew each other. At the cathedral in Lincoln, a priest named Philip asked permission to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Alexander agreed and suggested he stop at Clairvaux on the way. This Philip did. Upon arriving there, Philip was overcome by the beauty, communal spirit, and organization of the abbey. He extended his visit and eventually asked Bernard if he could just stay. Bernard's letter to Alexander the Magnificent, from about the year 1129, still exists. He wrote, "Your Philip, wishing to go to Jerusalem, has found his journey shortened, and has quickly reached the end that he desired.... [Now his feet are standing within the gates] of Jerusalem.... And this, if you are willing to perceive it, is Clairvaux. This is Jerusalem, and is associated by a certain intuition of the spirit, by the entire devotion of the heart, and by conformity of daily life, with [that holy city] which is in heaven."

This Advent begins anew the three-year cycle of scripture readings at Mass, and today's repeat the same responsorial psalm we sang one week ago on the final Sunday of the three-year cycle. Pilgrims first sang this psalm of praise. One of them recalls the invitation to join the caravan: "I rejoiced when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord.' And now our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem." Bernard applied that verse to Philip's experience at Clairvaux.

This psalm neatly follows today's passage from Isaiah, who invites all nations to climb the Lord's mountain, to the house of the God of Jacob, for the word of the Lord shall come from Jerusalem. Jesus made these pilgrimages, and on the last of them, just before his crucifixion, he preached the words from today's gospel, anticipating his Second Coming.

Our lives are a pilgrimage toward the city that the Book of Revelation calls the New Jerusalem. One way we prepare for our journey to heaven is to find a spiritual Jerusalem on earth. Philip found his at Clairvaux. I feel as though I found mine in Kansas City. In your life, what is your Jerusalem? Where do you most feel at home? Where is it that, when you're not there, you yearn to be there? In fact, you rejoice when someone says, "Let us go there." When you know your spiritual home, you find the things that Bernard cited: "a certain intuition of the spirit," "the entire devotion of the heart," and "conformity of daily life." Our commitment to an earthly home helps us commit to the one in heaven.

The First Sunday of Advent each year has us focus not on the first coming of Christ at Bethlehem, but on his Second Coming yet to be. If Christ were to come now, inviting you today to enter the eternal city, are you ready? Could you sing as we did today, "Let us go rejoicing to the house of the Lord"? If not, to which house are you clinging? Advent aims to stimulate rejoicing. It suggests that a true desire for the New Jerusalem derives from faithfulness to our own Jerusalem. Faithfulness prepares us for the coming of Christ.

Sunday, November 27, 2022