

LOYALTY

Sermon for Advent 3B-Jn1:6-8, 19-28, Is. 61:1-4, 8-11

LPC, 12/17/17

I have been reading an historical novel set in the time of Alfred the Great of Wessex, the second half of the ninth century. At the time, the British Isles were a patchwork quilt of minor Saxon kingdoms and lands ruled by the pagan Danes, very different from what we think of as Great Britain today. According to my novel, and I have no reason to suppose this is inaccurate, the loyalties of various lords and lairds and thanes played off each other in this period as loyalties shifted between dominant armies. In this book, in fact, it's hard to keep track of who's on whose side. Alliances seemed to be quite changeable.

Being of a theological bent, I wonder if these shifting loyalties might be a viable metaphor for the human will. I am not talking about political loyalties, although many of us do feel free to support one party and then another in any given election depending on the issues and candidates. I am talking about which loyalties govern our behavior, our attitudes and relationships. What I am suggesting is that within each one of us, different realities compete for our loyalties, *as they are played out in our thoughts and actions.*

For example, we may have a conscious allegiance to eating healthily, but confronted with a beautiful cupcake or a pile of cheesy nachos, our loyalties shift. Our inner loyalties are in conflict whenever we think something like, "I shouldn't drink so much," but then have another drink anyway, or "I really should spend my time more productively" but start another game of computer solitaire.

Whenever we formulate an idea that begins, "I really should..." but then do something else, we are experiencing the competition of inner loyalties. As a pastoral counsellor, I hear things like, "I really shouldn't take offense, but I have to admit my feelings are hurt." Or, "I know I should forgive and forget, but I can't get this out of my mind." Or, "I know I should love my neighbor, but this person is really wrong, and shouldn't I stand up for what I think is right?"

Some of our loyalties are articulated and conscious, like the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America. And some are unconsciously held, and we only become aware of them when they are challenged. We may not know, for example, how strong our loyalty to West Virginia is until an out-of-state friend makes a crack about ... well, the kind of thing that out-of-staters tend to make cracks about.

Some of our strongest loyalties arise from biology: the hard-wiring every one of carries with in for self-preservation: our loyalty to ourselves and to our own blood. And so the strongest conflicts we feel between our articulated loyalties and our biological loyalty are when we feel personally threatened. For example, we explicitly believe in "liberty and justice for all," but when someone else's sense of liberty and justice butts up against ours, we're going to stand up for our side.

I'm not saying this is a bad thing. It is what it is, and what competing loyalties are is reality if you are a normal human being. Christians know this as well as anybody. In fact,

Christian writers going back to the beginning recognize the reality of inner conflict. St. Paul famously writes, in Romans 7:15: “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” And Christian mystics throughout the centuries write of “spiritual warfare.”

The term “spiritual warfare” traditionally refers to doing battle with the forces of evil. But the most sophisticated spiritual writers recognize that often the most difficult inner conflict is not between what is clearly good and what is clearly evil, but between two things that are both good. Writers like St. Augustine of Hippo even propose that there is no such thing as pure evil. What appears to be evil is in fact corrupted good, or a good that fall short of the ultimate good.

Consider the conflict felt by a parent who is offered the job of her dreams in a distant state, which would require the uprooting of her family from a home they love. Her love and responsibility to her family are obviously a good thing, but to find self-fulfillment and make the most of her training and gifts is also a good thing.

Today’s story from the Gospel of John is about John the Baptist being questioned by the religious authorities. This story takes place only in the Gospel of John, which suggests that the Gospel-writer John had a particular interest in establishing that John the Baptist never claimed to be the Messiah, and in fact stated categorically that he was not.

Reading between the lines, we can infer that in the environment in which John the Evangelist was writing, it was important to establish that John the Baptist was the forerunner, not the Christ. This in turn implies that John the Baptist had a significant following who may have resisted transferring their allegiance to Jesus of Nazareth. We know from all the Gospels that many people came first to John the Baptist, and then did transfer their loyalty to Jesus. There may have been many who did not make the transition.

Here’s the point. John the Baptist was a good man. It was a good thing to follow him, to repent and be baptized. But he was not the show. Jesus was the show. And the time came when those who wanted to follow the higher good had to shift their alliance from John the Baptist to Jesus of Nazareth.

What does this mean for us? It could mean that the good things to which we rightfully give our loyalties may not be the highest goods, and that the time may come when to follow Jesus we need to shift our loyalties. The problem is, how do we know? If we shift our loyalties too often it’s as good as having no loyalties at all.

It all comes down to the fundamental message of Advent: Be alert. Be alert to the coming of the Lord, whenever and however he comes. And how does he come?

Scripture tells us how: in the bringing of good news to the oppressed, in the binding up the brokenhearted, in the liberation of captives, in the comfort of mourning, in the planting of righteousness, in the raising of former devastations, in the loving of justice. Study the passage of Isaiah for even more clues. This is the higher good. This is where our loyalties belong. And as we perceive the shifting of the location of these things, our loyalties need to shift too, if we want to follow Jesus.