

Advent III

One of the most joyous sentences in the Bible comes in today's first reading:

You have no more evil to fear.

Most of us get into an appalling pickle on a fairly regular basis. Even if we keep our noses on the grindstone and our diary filled with commitments, we know that our life is not under very much control, and that the things it depends on - like the plumbing, the good functioning of the gas fires, the fortunes of the ageing motor car, the vagaries of the stock market, the delicate state of the mortgage rate, our job-security, our self-respect and personal fulfilment, and the continuing good health of everyone we love - can be swept from under us disastrously, sometimes singly, but often in multiples - at any moment. This gives rise to a deep feeling of precariousness, which can sometimes make slaves of us, cowering within, and waiting for the next bit of rotten news.

God speaks, in the depths of our heart, with divine authority: *You have no more evil to fear*. In a season given to the celebration of Word becoming Flesh, we must let words like this take flesh in us. We need to give them a firm place in our mind. When they are well-established there, in our understanding, they can slowly penetrate the areas our conscious mind can't reach. And they have the power to do this, because they represent the depth of divine truth. As such they deserve to become present in our deepest place. They can leap into our mind when the next thing goes wrong, when we spot someone in trouble, when we suddenly feel our inadequacy before some task. They can be repeated like a prayer when we're on our way to work, and console us when we can see no answer to our problems. They are never out of place, because they are the simple truth about the whole human project. Since the Resurrection, we have been in the happy position of being able to apply to every fix and impasse the medicinal truth that it has no power to defeat us, that it will not prevent us from our goal.

It shouldn't be an obstacle for us to notice that things still *do* go wrong, and there are still plenty of apparent disasters and catalogues of damage. This is why our firm faith in God is pledged *under the sign of the Cross*. Even Jesus found this ultimate challenge agonising; but he did not for all that change his prayer of trust: that the will of God should be done. We have learned to believe that the things we suffer are *never* at variance with God's love for us or his plan for our final joy; even we can sometimes see that the worst moments of our life may bring to birth our best qualities, deepening our commitment, evoking our power to love, and leading us into fresh realms of trust and fidelity. When we can see no "redeeming feature" in some grief or loss, we must trust God blindly, and believe that there is a path through that will not darken our life, or kill the yeast of hope that sustains us.

John the Baptist was a fiery prophet, but he didn't see all that far into the future. Even he, the greatest of the prophets, wavered before his own fate, and sent from prison to urge Jesus to bring on the Day of Salvation. Jesus answered him, drawing his attention to the messianic signs he had worked, but his last words were: *Happy the one who does not lose faith in me*. The saints have proved the words of God true in their own trust. When we do the same, we do not convince God of anything. We convince ourselves, and may even catch a glimpse of the joy that is in God's heart, which Zephaniah depicts as the love of a young man:

*He will exult with joy over you
he will renew you with his love
he will dance with shouts of joy for you
as on a day of festival.*