

First Sunday of Advent
December 3, 2017
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Pope Francis visited Myanmar on Thursday of this last week. There in Southeast Asia is presently the greatest refugee crisis in the world. The Rohingya are a Muslim people who have lived for generations in what was formerly under British rule called Burma and now called Myanmar. They have been persecuted minority, not recognized by the Myanmar military, identified as Muslim rebels. With no place to go, 620,000 Rohingya refugees are displaced in refugee camps across the border in Bangladesh.

This last week Pope Francis went among the refugees, held hands, listened, apologized for the world for not abandoning them. And he said quite simply, “The presence of God today is called “Rohingya.”

Today we begin a new year in the life of the church. We celebrate the first Sunday in Advent, quite simply meaning we celebrate the coming of God. Here is the mystery of God as God with us. This is the mystery of the incarnation: that God is given in our lives, enfleshed in our life together. This is the mystery of Christ, the revelation of God.

We too often want to read the lessons for this week (and all the lessons of Advent as the first lessons of the church year) as if they were waiting for Christmas and the birth of Christ who will save us from the terrors of the world. But Advent isn't the prologue to Christmas. Advent is the celebration of what we celebrate every day of the year, God comes to us in cross and resurrection, known in the breaking of the bread, known in the church as the body of Christ, known when we know “the presence of God today is called Rohyingya.”

And what is so striking about God's coming is that what we celebrate this first Sunday in Advent, we celebrate every Sunday. God comes in the midst of destruction, at the breaking points of life, in suffering, in death. In these times, there is judgment and grace. In these moments there is in death life.

The first word is the word of judgment. As Isaiah says (in our first reading for today), “Look for where fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil, when the heavens are torn open . . . and the mountains quake, there we may see God's face and know his name.” (Is.64) And as the gospel for today says, “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then and only then will we see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory.” (Mk.13:24-26)

This is the advent of God. And what these lessons speak of we know in our lives: prodigal sons and daughters, those harmed by abuse, those lost to addiction; those lost in escape in our consumer society; those who suffer from war's violence, soldiers defiled and forgotten, refugees, outcasts, the poor who go unrecognized, looked over, in need. These are those outside us, next to us, among us.

Christmas will tell this same story of those who suffer. Mary and Joseph are refugees seeking shelter. Jesus is born in an animal shelter, in a manger. And as soon as he is born, Mary and Joseph hear the word that King, Herod, is going through the land killing all the newborn boys. He believes a reign of terror will show his power and secure his reign. Off to Egypt the holy family runs—refugees, undocumented, dispossessed, without possessions, desolate, alone.

This same story of the absence of God is told in parables: parables of hidden treasures, lost coins, lost sheep; parables of the person robbed and beaten on the side of the road and those who pass him by; of a prodigal son who is dispossessed and desolate and of a different kind of father who recognizes the son from a long distance and runs to embrace him. And this story of outcasts who are alone is the story of Jesus' life as he eats with, speaks with, and heals them. Jesus' life is itself given as he is cast out: last supper and betrayal, mob violence and crucifixion, death on a cross.

The crucifixions of life are clear. That they are judgments is equally clear. How this is resurrection is not so clear, though we hear that the first is inseparable from the second. Like parables, crucifixions shock us into the presence of God. How this is so, is to hear how it is, as Pope Francis says that "the presence of God today is called Rohingya."

I'd like to invite you to reflect with me on how the Rohingya bear the presence of God.

I'd like to think first of how those who suffer reveal God. Think of those who are alone. Think of the persons uprooted, violently forced to leave home, unable to meet their basic needs together.

Think of how these people feel because of what has happened to them.

How they reveal judgment is clear. They are alone. They have been left alone. And we look away. If we have but eyes to see and ears to hear, they are the presence of God in judgment, most often of things left undone. And this isn't only our individual failure. Those in need make us aware that we live in another world apart from those who suffer. We as a people have failed to create a home, to create communities, to create economies, to create states where people can live together.

The ancient city of late antiquity—in Corinth, Philippi, Thessalonica, all the way to Rome—these cities were marked by such a divide. To be a citizen was to have property. To have property was to have purchase power. To have property was to exercise power in shaping the life of the city. Outside the city gates were the poor, literally those without property. To be poor was to be homeless, to live day-by-day, doing what work was available.

Ancient statues depict this divided world. The rich look away at the horizon while extending a hand to offer a pittance to the poor. A pittance. The word comes from the word "pity" and comes to mean the small portion given to the poor. The pittance the rich extended to the poor are not so much a matter pity, however, Rather, the pittance given reinforced the status of the wealthy. Charity marked the absolute divide between the world of citizens who owned property and the faceless world of the poor.

While the divide of rich and poor left the poor alone, it also left the rich alone in their own world, anxious about the fragility of their lives. Natural disaster, famine, illness, war: a person of means could be suddenly thrown to the other side, without property, poor and alone. And the more that was accumulated, the more a person could feel what they could lose. No wonder persons clinged to property and privilege. No wonder the seven deadly sins came to be greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, sloth, and, first and last, pride as seeing the world as centered on oneself and one's life as best, as deserving its riches.

"The presence of God today is the Rohingya," the faceless ones. To recognize them is to recognize the presence of God as the judgment of God. God's presence, God's coming, comes

first in judgment. But there has to be more. To be the presence of God, the presence of God in the Rohingya must also be the presence of resurrection.

The reading from the Gospel of Mark for today begins in judgment. The promise, though, is more. In the coming of God in judgment, the gospel proclaims we “will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. Then God will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.” (13:26,27) So think with me, if you will, how this is so for the Rohingya. In other words, as Jesus’ says (in the beatitudes), what does it mean to say, “Blessed be the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Lk.6:20). “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matt.5:10).

I ask, “How is new life given to those who are poor, persecuted, and oppressed into submission of another order that is not their own?” “How,” I ask,” is the presence of God as resurrection given to the Rohingya?” The answer can’t be simply words. Claims of grace, claims of resurrection, cannot simply be words they hear. Resurrection must be what they experience. And what they experience is recognition.

For those harmed from trauma, they come to feel alone, to feel that the world is against us, that there is no health in us. Trauma is felt in the body. The body responds by shutting down, by depression.

But trauma cannot be forgotten—hence the triggers that cause the involuntary responses of fear, anger, and sadness.

Judgment is itself a matter of grace. To hear the word of judgment spoken, those who suffer feel recognized. They hear that they are not alone as they hear that what has happened is not what is meant to be. This is recognized in many ways. Peter Brown, the great historian of early Christianity, tells of the recognition that comes in the change in a public statue following the spread of Christianity. Instead of a person of wealth gazing into the horizon and condescendingly reaching down to give to the poor, with but eyes never meeting, the human person who gives to the poor is depicted as bending down, eyes meeting, with hands open to give what is needed.

With recognition the person who gives claims a shared humanity with those in need. In recognition, persons are bound together in a love that reaches out beyond themselves. As Christians claim, the presence of God is given in the love of neighbor. And to the question, “who is my neighbor?” Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan.

Peter Brown says that in the actions of recognition and embrace, the Hellenistic world of late antiquity with its divisive categories of rich and poor, educated and uneducated, civilized and barbarian is dissolve. The face of Western culture is forever changed. “Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of God.” God is Father of us all. All are members of the household of God.

Pope Francis offers us an Advent greeting that isn’t only judgment but recognition.

He recognized the 620,000 Muslim Rohingya from Myanmar who have been exiled. He expressed his sorrow saying, “In the name of all those who have persecuted you and have done you harm, especially for the indifference of the world, I ask forgiveness.’ Pope Francis’ remarks, which he made in Italian, were then translated for the crowd and for the Rohingya. Many of them were in tears.” The Rohingya recognized that they were recognized and no longer felt alone.

[\(http://www.catholicerald.co.uk/news/2017/12/01/pope-francis-asks-rohingya-people-for-forgiveness/\)](http://www.catholicerald.co.uk/news/2017/12/01/pope-francis-asks-rohingya-people-for-forgiveness/)

The presence of God is not given as a program to remove the divisions of the world, however much those actions are needed. The presence of God is given in the embrace of recognition we call love in the midst of the crucifixions of the world. In that embrace we know we are not alone. In that embrace we are drawn out of ourselves into life in God. Judgment and embrace, the crucifixion and the resurrection are given together, inseparable.

That this is so is expressed by the Anglican poet, T.S. Eliot, in the last of his *Four Quartets* titled “Little Gidding,” beginning with a quote from the Anglican mystic, Julian of Norwich,

All shall be well and

all manner of things shall be well.

When the tongues of flame are in-folded’

Into the crowned knot of fire

And the fire and rose are one.”

The advent of God, God’s coming among us, is always around us, if we have but eyes to see and ears to hear. So, as the gospel for today concludes, the advent of our life in God calls us to, “wake up.” Be mindful. Be attentive.

Advent blessings to you all.