



Third Sunday in Advent

11 December 2005

Isaiah 61.1-4, 8-11

1 Thessalonians 5.16-24

St. John 1.6-8, 19-28

It's like my dear departed Dad used to say: Lions beware, the Christians are at it again. If you've been listening to the radio, watching TV, reading the newspapers, or surfing the web you perhaps know what I'm talking about. The latest screed of the so-called Christians is all about their indignation over businesses, sales clerks, banners, and lights that proclaim "Happy Holidays" rather than "Merry Christmas"—and here it's only the Third Sunday of Advent. National and local newspapers recently reported the reasoning of Focus on the Family regarding all of this: Amanda Banks, spokeswoman for James Dobson – who recently devoted one whole 30-minute radio broadcast recently on the topic, says: "Many businesses in America would not survive the months of November and December if it wasn't for people going out and buying Christmas gifts. That's where our frustration comes from. You're making bucks from us but not willing to acknowledge where you're making it." Now we know: it's the poor, put-upon Christians who fuel America's annual frenzy of over-consumption. Quite predictably, Jerry Falwell has also jumped with all fours onto this float of Christmas indignation, and so too has the Tupelo, Mississippi-based American Family Association, criticizing a whole host of major retailers for neglecting the word "Christmas" in their advertising and their in-store sales banners. Apparently they would like Christ put back into the buying and selling of the holiday. And you know those evergreen trees we chop down, bring inside, and decorate? a practice the Christians appropriated from the pagan Druids? Ms. Banks informs us that they are to be called by their *correct* name: "they are Christmas trees, for Pete's sake," she says—"so call them that!" Gosh, I'll bet the Druids would have liked to have known that.

Some businesses, of course, who know a good thing when they see it, have made sure to call America's annual celebration of consumerism by its truly meet, right, and salutary name. Abercrombie & Fitch, peddler of soft-porn advertising and shoddily-made, indecently-overpriced clothes designed to hyper-sexualize the adolescent and pre-adolescent bodies of upper-middle class American children, has replaced "Happy Holidays" on its store windows with "Christmas 2005." Reportedly, sales are going through the roof as the same Christians who boycotted the chain as recently as two years ago buy up heaps and gobs of clothing made in the sweat shops of third world countries by poor people who would have to work nearly a year to buy even one pair of Abercrombie & Fitch's pre-tattered, navel-baring blue jeans. And good-old Bailey, Banks & Biddle, purveyors of high-end jewelry and gee-gaws for the blue-blood set, report they can hardly keep in stock their 10-inch-high, Lladro porcelain nativity scenes—limited addition, of course, and priced at a mere \$850 or so dollars. Good news, however: not all displays of one's righteousness need come with such a high price tag. One web-site is selling rubber wrist bands imprinted with the slogan "Just say Merry Christmas." Reportedly several million have been sold at a dollar a piece—plus shipping. Thanks be to Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.

And let us not forget to bring the flag in on all the fun. Douglas Groothuis, so-called-professor of philosophy at Denver Seminary justifies the indignation of the Christians by saying, "They're *concerned* . . . Christmas is part of American history and culture . . . it really is *Christ*-mas." It's like the bumper sticker on the no-doubt-

Christian Humvee urban assault vehicle said, "Jesus is the reason for the season." Or is it more like the Gospel of St. John says, "Jesus began to weep."?

What then shall we do? We shall stay out of the whole fray, for this whole idiotic brouhaha does not point to the Christ of the Gospel. This whole insane and one-sided debate does not point to the one who was born in poverty to an unwed mother. It does not point to the one who ate with sinners and outcasts. It does not point to the one who touched the untouchables nor does it proclaim the one who upon the Holy Cross proclaims to all God's unconditional, unquenchable love, mercy, and peace. It does not point to the one whose sandals we are not worthy to untie, and it has nothing to do with our mission to make the earth a garden of love and peace.

This whole debate over whether it shall be Merry Christmas or Happy Holidays has no meaning for you whatsoever. For you, good people of God, it is a bootless and pointless distraction. Rather, for you the baptized, your life in Christ is as Isaiah the prophet sings: The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon you . . . God has sent you to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners . . . to comfort all who mourn; to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning . . . For the LORD your [GOD] love[s] justice."

And now may the God of peace make you entirely holy and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The God who calls you is faithful and that same God will do all of this—for you . .