

1st Sunday of Advent - (Year B) – December 3, 2017

IS 63:16B-17, 19B; 64:2-7; PS 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19; 1 COR 1:3-9; MK 13:33-37

Sophistry is a philosophical term meaning: *the use of false or mistaken arguments with the intent to deceive*. One of my **seminary professors** described *sophists*—those who **practice sophistry**—as people who like to argue for **the sake of winning arguments**, but who have no interest **in**, or concern **for**, or in some cases, *belief in* truth.

I asked this professor, “**How do you win an argument with a sophist, then?**”

He said, “**You don’t. You walk away. It’s a sign of insanity to argue with someone who isn’t interested in the truth.**”

This professor’s advice greatly simplifies things, because **we don’t have to waste time** with people who don’t have a shred of interest in seeking the truth, but who do seem to enjoy arguing for the sake of tying their opponent in mental knots...just for the fun of it.

Here’s a well-known **sophist question** intended to cause doubt and confusion for *Christians* that you may have heard before:

Can God make a stone too heavy for him to lift?

At first glance, this question might rattle the faith of a believer—which is exactly what a sophist *wants* to do. After all, for God to be **omnipotent**—or **all-powerful**—as we claim he is when we recite the Creed on Sundays and call Him “**Almighty**”—there *can’t* be something he **can’t do**. He must be able to do **anything** and **everything**.

For an unsuspecting believer, this kind of dilemma might *trigger* a crisis of faith. And that’s precisely what the **smart-aleck sophist** wants—to trouble the hearts and minds of those who seek **truth...truth** which sophists don’t **believe in**, or *care about*.

But the solution to this **apparent** dilemma is quite simple. As Catholic apologist **Jimmy Akin** puts it:

“[T]his challenge...involves a mistaken idea of what omnipotence is. Omnipotence doesn’t mean the ability to do anything you can say. It means the ability to do anything that is possible—anything that can be done.”

<http://www.catholicfidelity.com/apologetics-topics/science-philosophy/can-god-create-a-stone-too-heavy-to-lift-by-jimmy-akin/>

For instance, you can *say* “**square circle**”, but it’s impossible to even **imagine** such a thing, no matter how hard you try. You can **visualize** a circle, and **call** it square, but it’s

still a **circle** because it's **round**. The moment it ceases to be round, it's no longer a circle. So, just because you can *say* "**square circle**", doesn't make it **real** or even *possible*—either in the **physical world** or in the **imagination**.

So, getting back to the **sophist's *deliberately deceptive question*** about God's **omnipotence**, we can see that, with proper use of logic, the question doesn't even need to be **answered**, let alone *entertained*, because **the question itself** is absurd.

So, what does all this have to do with **Advent**?

Quite a lot—*particularly* when we consider the question that the **Prophet Isaiah** posed to God on behalf of his people in our **1st Reading**. Isaiah asked:

Why do you make us wander, LORD, from your ways, and harden our hearts so that we do not fear you? (Isa 63:7)

Isaiah seems to blame God for the sins of the people when he says, in effect, that God "**make[s] us wander from [his] ways, and harden[s] our hearts so that we don't fear [him]**". Here, we might suspect Isaiah of a kind of **sophistry** for accusing God of *what human beings did to themselves*. But before we too quickly condemn Isaiah, we must realize that the question he asks is more common than we might think.

In a memorable scene from a movie called *Calvary* about a priest in a small Irish village who is burdened by the **indifference of his parishioners** to their own Catholic faith, a member of his parish who **publicly and shamelessly commits adultery** comes into a restaurant where the priest is having lunch with a member of his family. The woman is in that neighborhood for a rendezvous with the man with whom she's been cheating on her marriage.

She pulls up a chair at the priest's table and brags about what she's about to do.

The priest says, "**You're informing me of your adultery in advance.**"

The other person at the table, disgusted by the woman's arrogance, asks her, "**What are you expecting *him* to do about it?**"

The adulteress replies tauntingly, "**Stop me from committing a mortal sin.**"

The priest responds, "**You have to stop *yourself*. I can't stop you.**"

And here is the key point. **Neither a priest in particular, nor God in general, is responsible for a sinner's actions.** We are each answerable to God for **our own** actions.

Now, considering that there is nothing that the Almighty God **cannot** do, we must acknowledge that there are certainly things he **will not** do. One of those things he will **not** do is take away our **free will** so that we **don't sin**.

Nor will he **force** us to **love** him!

And this is important to understand, especially when trying to reconcile the concept of a **loving God** with a **world full of evil**.

After all, why does God allow **terrorism**? Why does God allow **innocent children** to die of **starvation** in Africa, or to be **put to death in the womb** by their own mother? Why does God allow **child abuse**? Or why does God allow **sexual predator bosses** to take advantage of their **employees** whether in **business** or in **government**? Why does God allow the **Hitlers**, the **Joseph Stalins**, the **Osama bin Ladens** and the **Kim Jong Uns** of the world to **ruin** or even **destroy** millions of people's lives and seem to get away with it?

When people ask me, "**Why does God allow such evil in the world?**"

I answer, "**Because of love.**"

Naturally, they look at me like I'm **nuts**. So, I ask them this question:

"How would you feel about your parents' love for you if you discovered that *the only reason they took care of you* when you were little was because they were paid \$10,000 a month by the government to *pretend* to care about you? Would you be happy about that?"

Naturally, they say, "**No.**"

So, I ask, "**Why?**"

They will almost always say, "**Because the love wouldn't be real and I want it to be real.**"

I answer, "**So does God!**"

God wants *our love for him* to be real, and, in order to be **real**, it has to be **chosen**.

And for that love to be chosen, we *must* be free to choose not to love God.

Many people in the world choose *not* to love God. And because they choose **not** to love God, they open themselves to the **opposite** of God's goodness—which is *evil*—and that evil not only touches those who choose and commit evil, but *by its very nature*, that evil inevitably touches other people who are **affected by the sinner's choice** to reject God, including **innocent** people.

So, the evil we see **around** us—and *in* us—is a *consequence* of **God's respect for our free will** and his desire that our love for him be **authentic**, which means we have to be able to choose to love him...or **not** to love him.

Now, when we listen **again** to Isaiah's question in the 1st Reading, we might hear it differently that we did the first time.

Why do you make us wander, LORD, from your ways, and harden our hearts so that we do not fear you? (Isa 63:7)

We know that **God** does not *make us wander* from his ways...that *He* does not or *harden our hearts* not to revere him. *We do it to ourselves...by the choices we make*. And the result is quite **predictable**. As you listen to Isaiah's description of the state of things in his time, ask yourself if his words don't accurately describe the state of things in our own time.

Behold, you are angry, and we are sinful; all of us have become like unclean people, all our good deeds are like polluted rags; we have all withered like leaves, and our guilt carries us away like the wind. There is none who calls upon your name, who rouses himself to cling to you; for you have hidden your face from us and have delivered us up to our guilt. (Isa 64:4-6)

We know that **there's nothing God cannot do**. But we've certainly identified that **there are things that God will not do**. **He will not overrule our free will**.

He *will*, however, do everything he can to **influence** us to abandon our life of sin, to *repent* and to turn back to him. He will shower us with his grace and send constant reminders of his love to *snap us out of our trance*. Like giving us the **Season of Advent**.

So, Isaiah, speaking on behalf of a people mired in sin, implores God:

Return for the sake of your servants, the tribes of your heritage. Oh, that you would

rend the heavens and come down, with the mountains quaking before you...Would that you might meet us doing right, that we might be mindful of you in our ways! (Isa 63:16-17, 19; 64:4)

Isaiah, fully **aware** of—we might say fully “*awake*” to—the **self-imposed misery** suffered by a sinful people, begs God to save his people **again**, as he originally saved them from slavery in Egypt.

Which brings us to the Gospel—not just to the **Gospel passage** we heard proclaimed today—but the Gospel in the general sense...the **full Gospel**...the “**Good News**”.

What **Good News**?

That God never abandons his people, even after **they**—after **WE**—abandon him!

Isaiah recalled God’s faithfulness and compassion when he **originally** rescued his people from their **bondage in Egypt**. Now, he begs for God to come *again* to save the people who have **relapsed** into slavery—this time, not to the **Egyptians**—but to *sin*...and the **self-imposed misery** that *inevitably* flows from **preferring sin** to **loving God**.

It’s no accident that **we** do the same as Isaiah during **Advent**. We recall God’s abundant compassion for us *that*—when we were hopelessly lost in sin—he didn’t just **feel sorry** for us. He **came** to us the **first time**, in the person of Jesus Christ, in humble **poverty**, in a way that we, in our *spiritual poverty*—our **absolute helplessness**—could identify with...and not be intimidated by.

St. John writes in his Gospel:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. (Jn 3:16-17)

The word “**compassion**” means “**to suffer with**”. God’s love for us was so immense that he **came to us**...*in person*, in the **Second Person** of the Trinity, the **Son of God, Jesus Christ**. He **entered into** our suffering, taking the worst of it onto himself by **becoming what we are** and **subjecting himself** to all the misery of fallen humanity—and more—but without ever committing a single sin.

And just as Isaiah recognized God’s **first rescue mission** to his enslaved people, and now longs for God’s return; so too, do we—who recall Christ’s first coming in humility as a

baby—now long for him to **come again in power and glory**, to save us from a world **careening toward self-destruction**...minute by minute.

We beg Jesus to come **again** and save us from this world of sin and suffering, and we prepare for that **Final Coming** by entering into Advent, **fully aware** of God's love, and **fully awake** to the dangers that pull us away from it.

Jesus said:

Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know when the time will come...Watch therefore; you do not know when the lord of the house is coming, whether in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning. May he not come suddenly and find you sleeping. (Mk 13:33, 35-36)

Here Jesus speaks of “**sleeping**”. But not the **healthy** kind of sleeping! Here he refers to what we might call “**sleeping at the wheel**”—not attending to what is most important and putting **ourselves** and **others** in danger due to *our negligence*.

And here we might consider the lesson of **Martha and Mary**—the sisters of Lazarus—who hosted Jesus in their home. **Martha** was very busy **preparing food** and **serving** Jesus, while **Mary** sat at Jesus' feet **listening to him**. Martha bellyached that she was doing all the work and Mary was—literally—“*sitting down on the job*”. As important and necessary as **hospitality** is, Jesus admonished Martha for losing sight of what was *most important*. He didn't reprimand her for doing a good thing—serving. He scolded her for thinking it was better to be **doing a bunch of good things** instead of **focusing on him**.

Perhaps it would do us good as we enter into **Advent** to revisit this passage about **Martha and Mary** from **Chapter 10 in Luke's Gospel**. After all, shopping for **gifts**, attending **celebrations** with family, friends and co-workers—these are **good activities**. But if they interfere with the “**reason for the season**”—which is our **love** and **gratitude** for...and our longing for the **return** of...**Jesus**, then those good activities actually become **harmful**.

Everything we do during this Advent should point our minds and hearts to Jesus—the Jesus who poured out his **heart**—indeed his very *life*—to **save our souls**.

Advent is about priorities.

If **any activity or relationship**—no matter *how good* it is—squeezes **Jesus** out of *the season that is given us to prepare our hearts for Him*...well, that activity or relationship—**whatever it is**—needs to take a backseat to him.