



## Incarnation as Invasion

This column is an adaptation of a homily I gave on January 27th in Ontario, the III Sunday of the Liturgical Year.

In the Gospel Jesus of Nazareth bursts forth from obscurity into the dramatically public life he will lead until his dying breath. With the arrest of John the Baptist “Jesus began to preach.” He made John’s message of repentance his own, but with striking adaptations. John’s galvanizing baptizing had said to the people indiscriminately, “Come *to me*” to be washed clean in the Jordan. But Jesus, in contrast, said to a few chosen ones, “Come *after me*.” And “he went around all of Galilee.” His was a message on the move. It would set in motion the lives of those who followed him as well, for he promised to make them “fishers of men.”

The 204 villages around the Sea of Galilee had a long-standing, well-deserved reputation for rebelliousness. Half Jewish and half Gentile, the region was darkened by paganism. The prophet Isaiah called it “a land overshadowed by death”—an apt image of the World in the hold of the dark power of the Devil. This “Galilee of the Gentiles” is the world Jesus invaded with his preaching. I like to think of the Incarnation as an invasion. In order to overthrow the dominion of the Devil, the Son of God had to invade his domain, just as the Allies had to invade Europe at

Normandy in 1944 to set the captive peoples free. Hitler did not expect the invasion to occur there because the Allies tricked him into thinking they would land elsewhere. As a result he did not send enough troops to Normandy to keep them from securing the beachhead.

Jesus secured the beachhead for the Incarnation in a place Satan was not expecting either—the obscurity of a stable in Bethlehem. But his agent Herod was quick to react when Magi from the East came in search of “the newborn king of the Jews.” He slew the Holy Innocents and probably thought he had repulsed the invasion. Nothing in the next thirty years of the Incarnate Son’s hidden life at Nazareth would have aroused his suspicion anew.

In today’s Gospel the Incarnate Son launches a frontal attack on the Devil’s dominion, announcing the invasion in words Satan most fears to hear: “Repent, for the Kingdom of *God* is at hand.” The walls have been breached; Satan’s hold has been broken: another authority is at loose in his land. A rival King says, “Come, follow *me*.”

In this war of liberation the Devil, like Hitler with “Fortress Europe,” sets up strongholds to thwart the invasion. The first is ignorance—of God’s power and grace, of the depths of human depravity and the heights of human sanctity. The second is fear—of God’s wrath, of human revenge. The third is sickness of body and mind.

Jesus’ formidable assault on these fortresses begins with his *teaching* in the synagogues. “You shall know the truth,” he assures the

ignorant, “and the truth will set your free.” Next he *proclaims the Gospel*— Good News to those who fear the future: “Behold, I make all things new.” And the Devil’s last stronghold falls to the healing power of divine love as *Jesus cures illness and casts out demons*.

The war of liberation that began with the invasion of the Incarnation goes on to this day, but the Victory has been won. The Lamb who was slain has conquered death forever and shares his triumph with those who “come after” him.

The Victory has been won, but Satan refuses to accept defeat. Hitler, too, refused to surrender in 1945; and the War went on to claim many more lives before all the captives could be freed. So it is with the war of liberation Jesus wages on our behalf. “Come after me,” he says. “I need *you* to help me make all things new. I need *you* to help me win the battle for the glorious freedom of the children of God.”