

Jesus Is Our (Metaphorical) Rock: A homily for the Thursday in 1 Advent, Year 1

(Isaiah 26:1-6, Ps 118:19-24, Matt 7:21-27)

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

In college, I worked as a writing tutor. As word of this avocation got out to my friends, they started asking me to help with resumes and with statements for various applications. Probably the most useful idea I shared with them was something I'd been told, and tried to follow, when I was writing my own statements. "To get the readers to remember you," the advice went, "you have to get them to imagine you doing the things you mention." In other words: show, don't tell.

And so I might recommend adding a paragraph that, to take a particular example, drew a picture of my friend's experience building concrete canoes for a civil engineering competition. Yes, it was great that in so doing he had learned to be mindful of the intricacies of mixing ratios, but that message was more likely to stick if his readers actually pictured him out on the river for that first precarious test-paddle. We both hoped that the image helped the idea become better integrated in the mind of the reader: "Oh, Mike So-and-so, yeah, he was the concrete canoe guy, right?"

Of course, the great power of pictures and symbols, of metaphor and imagination, is not news to the inheritors of a tradition shaped by the likes of John the Evangelist, Augustine of Hippo, and Ignatius Loyola. They each knew that forming and nourishing disciples is about much more than presenting ideas to us. It's about helping those ideas gain some purchase within, in our minds, yes, but even more so in our hearts. They knew, and we know, that biblical and theological imagery can, if we let it,

get inside us, becoming, in one author's words "part of ourselves ... absorbed into our very life."¹

If we believe the words of scripture can act upon us in this way, then liturgies like today's present an embarrassment of riches for our spiritual nourishment. At the center are Jesus's words from Matthew's gospel: "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock" (Matthew 7:24-25). Jesus and his teachings are our bedrock, our sure foundation—vast, dependable, and in an important sense unbreakable.

You probably noticed these images of rock and stone throughout our lections today, and each appearance offers its own richness, its own power to reach our inner nooks and crannies. *My* moment of intimate encounter came with the recapitulation of the image in our Communion Hymn: "On Christ the solid rock I stand. *All* other ground is sinking sand." When we drop the conceit of the house and put our own two feet squarely on that rock, or in that sand, it seems to change things.

"Sinking sand" reminded *me* immediately of my inbox, and my relationship with it, of how quickly the dream of tidiness and control slips through my fingers as requests, reports, and referrals pile up. My *strategies* are sinking sand, my plans for getting through the day on my own efforts rather than by trusting that I am supported and saved by a rock and redeemer who doesn't care what my inbox, or even my resume, looks like. All other ground is sinking sand.

¹ Martin Thornton, *Christian Proficiency* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1988): 77.

An image can do its full formative work on our hearts and souls only if we invite it in and bid it stay a while. That's what these contemplative seasons are all about. What will your image be? Advent, of course, has plenty of worthy pictures for us to choose from and sit with: light in the darkness, a highway in the desert, hills toppled and valleys raised, strange messengers from earth and heaven. But I think, in what for us is a season of papers, exams, grading, shopping, and last-minute travel, we could do worse than to spend our time with the image of our "everlasting rock" (Isaiah 26:4). Our houses, and our hopes, can be built on nothing less.