

2nd Sunday of Advent – Cycle A

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

Introduction

Advent is really a season in 2 parts, with the 1st two weeks concerned with the Lord's coming as Judge of all at the end of time and the 2nd two weeks serving as the proximate preparation for His coming in the flesh. Our activities, like the Church's readings, should reflect that dual character.

The Old Testament readings of Advent set the mood and theme each week. As we hear these readings, we need to look at our own dreams and expectations. How do we express them? The prophets of the Old Testament used beautiful poetic expressions, such as the lamb lying at peace with the lion, swords being beaten into plowshares, and the great banquet to come that will be presided over by the Lord. What poetic and symbolic expressions would we use to describe the age that is to come when we will know the Lord fully? What does the "Day of the Lord" mean for us? Can we identify with the dreams of the prophets? Advent is a season of anticipation.

1st Reading - Isaiah 11:1-10

The holiness of the one God, creator and master of the world, dominates the message of Isaiah. Yahweh is the Holy One of Israel. Isaiah is intensely aware of his own sinfulness and that of his people. Sin in any form cannot be tolerated in God's holy presence; consequently Isaiah denounces Judah's pride, self-indulgence, and callous injustice toward the poor. Isaiah is convinced that Yahweh is about to strike down the nation in judgment. Not only will the land of Palestine be laid waste but all nature will be involved; the sin of man has affected the whole universe. Yet, Judah is still Yahweh's people, Jerusalem is the holy city whose foundation is secure. There will be a remnant, cleansed in the fire of judgment, who will be the inheritors of the promises made to David.

¹ But a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse, and from his roots a bud shall blossom.

Jesse was the father of King David, from whom all the kings of Judah descended. The reference to the stump does not necessarily mean that the dynasty has been destroyed, the family tree cut down so to speak, although the Maccabean revolt against the Seleucids (c. 165-161 B.C.) did install rulers (the Hasmoneans) who were not descended from David. It simply means a return to the very source of the dynasty, as covenanted by God.

² The spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him:

The *ruah*, the life-giving breath that comes from Yahweh to men and endows them with extraordinary power, insight, wisdom, etc. as we hear in this verse.

a spirit of wisdom and of understanding, a spirit of counsel and of strength, a spirit of knowledge and of fear of the LORD, ³ and his delight shall be the fear of the LORD.

This is the source of the traditional names of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The Septuagint and Vulgate read “piety” for “fear of the LORD” in its first occurrence; thus listing seven gifts. Fear of the LORD is not dread, but reverential awe; the beginning of wisdom, understanding, and knowledge.

Not by appearance shall he judge, nor by hearsay shall he decide, ⁴ But he shall judge the poor with justice, and decide aright for the land’s afflicted. He shall strike the ruthless with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked.

Just as Yahweh’s breath gives life, it can also administer chastisement because when God speaks, it happens.

⁵ Justice shall be the band around his waist,

A loincloth worn next to the body

and faithfulness a belt upon his hips.

Justice and fidelity are to be as close to the king as these two garments. Ephesians 6:13-17 gives a similar usage with soldier’s clothing.

⁶ Then the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; The calf and the young lion shall browse together, with a little child to guide them. ⁷ The cow and the bear shall be neighbors, together their young shall rest; the lion shall eat hay like the ox. ⁸ The baby shall play by the cobra’s den, and the child lay his hand on the adder’s lair.

The images portray a vision of the messianic era as paradise restored; there is universal peace and justice.

⁹ There shall be no harm or ruin on all my holy mountain;

All of Yahweh’s land, not just Jerusalem alone [not only Zion (and Moriah), God’s mountain, but Horeb (Sinai) as well]. Only the knowledge of God, the observance of His will, can bring about the long sought era of peace. The whole world, not just Israel, will share in the coming salvation

**for the earth shall be filled with knowledge of the LORD, as water covers the sea. ¹⁰
On that day, the root of Jesse,**

The root of Jesse is now an individual rather than an origin.

set up as a signal for the nations, the Gentiles shall seek out, for his dwelling shall be glorious.

This root of Jesse, this individual, will be the rallying point for the Gentile nations.

2nd Reading - Romans 15:4-9

The Letter to the Romans was probably written in Corinth, toward the end of Paul's third missionary journey, shortly before he returned to Jerusalem in the spring of AD 58.

Romans is not a summary of Christian doctrine, nor is it Paul's last will and testament – it isn't even a full sketch of Paul's view of Christianity. Some of Paul's most significant teaching (the Church, the Eucharist, the resurrection, for example) are missing from it. Rather, it is a presentation of his missionary reflections on the historic possibility of salvation now offered to all men in the good news of Jesus the Christ. Paul knows that man's justification and salvation depend not on the "deeds of the law," but on faith in Christ Jesus, the Son whom the Father's love did not spare. Through faith man shares in the effects of the plan of salvation conceived by the Father and brought to realization in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Our reading today comes from a section of the letter that discusses the demands of living the Christian life and our motivation for doing so.

⁴ For whatever was written previously was written for our instruction,

What was "written previously" was the Old Testament. The Old Testament is our book – it doesn't belong to a people long gone, but to us. Romans 4:23-24 makes the same point "*But the words, 'it was reckoned to him,' were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him that raised from the dead Jesus our Lord*".

that by endurance and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.

When Jesus' suffering is viewed against mankind's sacred history, it takes on a deeper meaning. Seen in this larger perspective, it gives the Christian a basis for their hope

⁵ May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to think in harmony with one another, in keeping with Christ Jesus, ⁶ that with one accord you may with one

voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is St. Paul's prayer for unity and harmony.

"Here Paul is blessing the Romans in the manner of the patriarchs and prophets. ... It is a great blessing that they should all understand and think alike. If you want to know just how great it is, look at what the Savior said in the Gospel: *If two or three of you agree, whatever they ask will be done for them by God* (Matthew 18:18)." [Origen (after A.D. 244), *Commentaries on Romans*]

⁷ Welcome one another, then, as Christ welcomed you,

Christ's command in John 13:34 is to "*Love one another as I have loved you*".

for the glory of God.

The motive behind all of Christ's redemptive activity

⁸ For I say that Christ became a minister of the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, to confirm the promises to the patriarchs,

Jesus had to be a Jew and minister to the Jews, in order to confirm God's promises to the patriarchs. As St. Paul understands these promises, both Jews and Gentiles are to share in them.

⁹ but so that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.

The Gentiles were included in the Old Testament promises. Even though Christ's ministry was directed to the Jews, the Gentiles were to be in His kingdom in due time, as the Old Testament promises themselves indicate.

"It was by mercy alone that the Gentiles were saved; hence they were bound to glorify God. It is a glory to God when they are blended together and united, when they offer praise with one mind, when they bear the weaker and when they do not neglect the member who has been cut off." [Saint John Chrysostom (ca. A.D. 391), *Homilies on the Epistle to the Romans* 28]

As it is written: "Therefore, I will praise you among the Gentiles and sing praises to your name."

Psalm 18:49 (18:50 in NAB), also 2 Samuel 22:50.

Gospel - Matthew 3:1-12

On the feast of the Immaculate Conception we hear of the Annunciation. In this reading we hear John the Baptist announce the coming of the Messiah some 30 years later; the beginning of Jesus' public ministry.

¹ In those days John the Baptist appeared,

Jesus' cousin, many think he was an Essene. John the Baptist is also known from extra-biblical sources as a preacher of repentance (such as Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.5.2'116-119).

preaching in the desert of Judea

The steep slope that falls from the central ridge of the country to the valley of the Jordan and the Dead Sea. Baptism in the Jordan indicates that John preached near the river, probably not far from Jericho. This is only a few miles distant from Qumran (where the Essenes are believed to be from and where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found). Josephus (*Wars of the Jews* 2.8.2-14'119-166) called the Essenes one of three philosophical sects of Jews, the other two being the Pharisees and Sadducees. The Essenes led a very austere life; they practiced celibacy, lived a common life, and held their possessions in common. Their normal garb was white, symbolizing the purity of morals which they cultivated. Even though they were Jews, they did not participate in the blood Temple sacrifices, but did send offerings to the Temple for unbloody sacrifices.

² (and) saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"

This summary of John's preaching is identical with the proclamation of Jesus in Matthew 4:17 (3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A). John is calling for a change of heart and conduct, a turning of one's life from rebellion to obedience toward God. The expression "kingdom of heaven" occurs only in Matthew and it means "kingdom of God". The expectation, found in Jewish apocalyptic writings, was that the kingdom was to be ushered in by a judgment in which sinners would be condemned and perish; an expectation which is apparently shared by John the Baptist.

³ It was of him that the prophet Isaiah had spoken when he said: "A voice of one crying out in the desert, 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.'"

Isaiah 40:3 is quoted.

⁴ John wore clothing made of camel's hair and had a leather belt around his waist.

The uniform of a prophet, especially Elijah (Zechariah 13:4, 2 Kings 1:8). The expectation of the return of Elijah from heaven to prepare Israel for the final manifestation of God's kingdom was widespread. According to Jesus, this expectation was fulfilled in John the

Baptist (Matthew 11:14; 17:11-13).

His food was locusts and wild honey.

Wild food, the food of a nomad. The locust has been interpreted by some to be the fruit of the carob tree, and wild honey has also been interpreted by some to be the sweet substance secreted by insects on the local shrubs (we will hear of this more when we study about the manna in another lesson); it is hard to conceive of wild bees in the desert. During the Advent liturgy, John is placed before us as a model of mortification and penance. Just as John's mission was to prepare the way for Jesus, a Christian's entire life is a preparation for his meeting with Christ. Mortification and penance play a significant part in John's life as they should in our own.

⁵ At that time Jerusalem, all Judea, and the whole region around the Jordan were going out to him

Quite a large following.

⁶ and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River

The Greek word *baptize* means to dip or immerse ceremonially, perhaps also to pour. Here, baptism is a religious rite of cleansing or purification. Priests washed before performing sacred rites, Jews washed before entering the Temple and before eating. What is unique here is that the washing is not done by the penitent, but by John himself.

as they acknowledged their sins.

A sense of moral guilt is widespread, as is the need to confess. It is not clear how the confession was done here, but it might be helpful to think of the Day of Atonement when general laments of broken promises occur. John's baptism of repentance did not have the power to cleanse the soul from sin as Christian baptism does.

⁷ When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism,

The Pharisees were the most important religious group in Jesus' time. They kept the law of Moses rigorously and also the oral traditions which had built up around it. They gave as much importance to the traditions as they did to the law itself. They strongly opposed the influence of Greek paganism and totally rejected the homage paid to the Roman emperor. Among them there were men of great spiritual eminence and sincere piety; but there were many others who exaggerated pharisaical religiosity to the extreme of fanaticism, pride and hypocrisy. It was this perversion of the true Israelite religion that John the Baptist (and later our Lord) castigated. The scribes, experts in the Law, predominantly belonged to this group. The Sadducees, on the other hand, were a smaller religious group than the Pharisees, but they included many influential people, most of them from the main priestly

families. They accepted as Scripture only the written Law, the first five books of the Old Testament but, unlike the Pharisees, they rejected oral tradition and were opposed to teachings not found in the Pentateuch. As a result, they rejected certain important truths, such as the resurrection of the dead. [They were the biblical fundamentalists of their day.] They went along easily with the terms dictated by the Romans, and they acquiesced in the introduction of pagan customs into the country. Their opposition to Christ was even more pronounced than that of the Pharisees.

he said to them, “You brood of vipers!

Jesus uses these same words to address the Pharisees in Matthew 12:34.

Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?

Although the basic idea is as old as the prophets, there is a new note of urgency in the call to repentance; the judgment of God is close.

⁸ Produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance.

Good works that go beyond the good intentions of repentance is what he is asking for; a follow-through of their intentions.

⁹ And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’

Salvation is not hereditary. This hints at a basic theme of Matthew: Gentiles can be saved (Amos 3:2). God does not show ethnic or social partiality (Deuteronomy 1:17; 16:19; 2 Chronicles 19:17; Acts 10:34; Romans 2:11; Galatians 2:6; Ephesians 6:4; Colossians 3:25).

For I tell you, God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones.

This alludes to the rejection of the Messiah by the Jews and His acceptance by the Gentiles: The Church of Jews and Gentiles is the new Israel and the true people of God.

¹⁰ Even now the ax lies at the root of the trees.

The situation is urgent.

Therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. ¹¹ I am baptizing you with water, for repentance,

John refers back to his address to the Pharisees and Sadducees (v8) “Give some evidence that you mean to reform”. They must change their behavior to reflect their faith.

but the one who is coming after me is mightier than I. I am not worthy to carry his

sandals.

Matthew differs from the other gospels and Acts 13:25 by “carrying” rather than “untying”. This might reflect a rabbinic teaching that a disciple should do for his teacher anything a slave would do except take off his shoes.

He will baptize you with the holy Spirit and fire.

John the Baptist did not limit himself to preaching penance and repentance; he encouraged people to receive his baptism. This baptism was a way of interiorly preparing them and helping them to realize that the coming of Christ was imminent. By his words of encouragement and by their humble recognition of their sins, they were prepared to receive Christ’s grace through baptism with fire and the Holy Spirit. The word “fire” points in a metaphorical way to the effectiveness of the Holy Spirit’s action in totally wiping out sins. It also shows the life-giving power of grace in the person baptized. “Fire” can also point to the judgment of God Himself (1 Corinthians 3:10-15) as well as the descent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost (Acts 2:34).

¹² His winnowing fan is in his hand.

A winnowing fan is a forklike shovel used to separate the wheat from the chaff – the useful from the useless. The threshed wheat was thrown into the air and the kernels fell to the ground to be gathered for storage while the chaff, blown off by the wind, was later swept up and burned.

He will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

This refers not only to bad deeds, it also refers to useless ones. For example, lives lacking in service to God and men. God will judge us for our omissions and lost opportunities. The “unquenchable fire” is the destroying fire of Gehenna.

Foremost among the personal qualities of John the Baptist is his remarkable humility: he resolutely rejects the temptation of accepting the dignity of Messiah which the crowds apparently wanted to bestow upon him. Instead, he pointed the way to the Messiah who would follow.