

3rd Sunday of Advent - 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

For the past 2 weeks we have heard of the Lord's coming as judge of all at the end of time. The priest wears penitential purple during this season to help us realize our part in turning from God's covenant and participating in acts of darkness (sin), although pink may be worn on this, "Gaudete", Sunday. There are images of light and darkness interwoven throughout the season's readings. The feeling of penitence comes as we force ourselves to compare our dreams, our great expectations, with reality. What keeps us from fulfillment in this moment? What hinders us from seeking the freedom that God offers us? Our fear of the unknown and our anxiety about taking risks often keeps us enslaved in our old ways and prevents us from reaching out for new ones. Our greed and possessiveness keep us from letting go of what we have so that we can seek the next step in life. God will free us from our enslavement to fear, injustice, poverty, negation, and disease if we simply let go and let Him guide us.

Gaudete Sunday, in the preconiliar delineation of the liturgical year, was regarded as a day of particular joy with Advent half over and Christmas soon to follow. The term Gaudete refers to the first word of the Introit (Entrance Antiphon) "Rejoice", taken from Philippians 4:4-5.

1st Reading - Isaiah 35:1-6a, 10

In last week's introduction to the first reading we heard that Isaiah was convinced that all Palestine would be laid waste by Yahweh because of the sinfulness of the people. Yet, there would be a remnant who will be the inheritors of the promises made to David.

Undergirding the doctrine of the remnant was Isaiah's faith in the divine control of history. Even in her greatest hour of trial, with Sennacherib (king of Assyria 705-681 B.C.) encamped under her walls, Jerusalem was promised deliverance if only she would place her trust in God. Isaiah's faith coupled salvation with repentance and conversion to Yahweh. From this faith stemmed Isaiah's conviction that Yahweh, faithful to His promises, would raise up a king from David's line whose rule of peace and justice would replace the faithless and vacillating service of the kings who had ruled from David's throne.

¹ The desert and the parched land will exult; the steppe will rejoice and bloom. ² They will bloom with abundant flowers, and rejoice with joyful song. The glory of Lebanon will be given to them,

Lebanon means "white", probably because of the snows which cover the upper slopes most of the year. It is a chain of mountains extending north from Northern Galilee for about 106 miles. The average altitude is 10,000 feet (the Waters of Merom are 6 feet above sea level, the Sea of Galilee is 696 feet below sea level, the Dead Sea is 1290 feet below sea level).

the splendor of Carmel and Sharon;

Sharon is the beautiful and fertile coastal plain of Palestine between Jaffa (Joppa) and the Mount Carmel range. In ancient times it was heavily forested.

They will see the glory of the LORD, the splendor of our God. ³ Strengthen the hands that are feeble, make firm the knees that are weak, ⁴ Say to those whose hearts are frightened: Be strong, fear not! Here is your God, he comes with vindication; With divine recompense he comes to save you.

Not only in the face of outrageous injustice, but toward the ordinary trials of life.

⁵ Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the deaf be cleared; ⁶ Then will the lame leap like a stag, then the tongue of the dumb will sing.

The most unfortunate will be among the first to share the blessings. [In our gospel reading today we hear of the fulfillment of this prophecy (Matthew 11:5)]. The messianic age has arrived.

¹⁰ Those whom the LORD has ransomed will return and enter Zion singing, crowned with everlasting joy; They will meet with joy and gladness, sorrow and mourning will flee.

This presupposes an exile of some sort. It could be the entering into the heavenly Jerusalem which has been opened by the sacrifice of Jesus which “ransoms” us.

2nd Reading - James 5:7-10

St. James is called “the younger” or “the less” to distinguish him from James the brother of John. He was the son of Alphaeus (Cleophas) and Mary (a close relative of Mary, mother of Jesus). On account of his close kinship with Jesus he is known as the “brother of the Lord.”

Some years after the Ascension, he was appointed Bishop of Jerusalem by his fellow apostles. St. Paul numbers him, along with Peter and John, among the Pillars of the Church (part of the inner circle). He was called “the just” by his countrymen on account of the austerity of his life and his strict adherence to the Law of Moses. Josephus reports that he was stoned to death by order of the High Priest Ananus in A.D. 62 or 63 (*Antiquities of the Jews* 20.9.1§197-203).

Sometime between A.D. 50 and his death, James wrote his epistle to the Jewish Christians dwelling in Palestine and adjacent countries. Its immediate destination was probably Antioch, with its strong Jewish population. It was no doubt written from Jerusalem as it doesn't seem that James ever left it. The main object of this letter is not to teach doctrine, but to improve morals. In the reading for today, these Jewish Christians are reminded of the need for patience, both in bearing the sufferings of human life and in their expectation of the coming of the Lord. When the Lord comes, it is then that they will receive their reward.

⁷ Be patient, therefore, brothers,

Not only in the face of outrageous injustice, but toward the ordinary trials of life.

until the coming of the Lord.

The parousia.

“The just judge will give you the rewards of your patience and will punish your adversaries with what they deserve. He sits at the door where he can watch everything you do, and he will come quickly to give each one whatever he or she deserves.” [Saint Bede the Venerable (ca. A.D. 700), *Concerning the Epistle of St. James*]

See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains.

The early and late rains (winter and spring rains) is an Old Testament expression used often in the listing of God’s gifts (Deuteronomy 11:14; Joel 2:23).

⁸ You too must be patient. Make your hearts firm, because the coming of the Lord is at hand.

Don’t try to rush things, the parousia will occur at God’s appointed time. There are many New Testament expressions of the nearness of the parousia (which came in A.D. 70 for the Jews when the Temple, a microcosm of their world, was destroyed).

⁹ Do not complain, brothers, about one another, that you may not be judged.

The Jews always seemed to “grumble” – Christians are called to maintain mutual relations within the community.

Behold, the Judge is standing before the gates.

The coming of the Lord is viewed as the coming of the judge.

¹⁰ Take as an example of hardship and patience, brothers, the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

The persecution of Christians is seen as a prolongation of that of the prophets. The prophets did not change their teaching because it was unpopular and neither can we, the Church.

“James tells us to look to the prophets, who never did anything wrong and who spoke the words of God’s Spirit to the people but who nevertheless suffered a terrible end at the hands of unbelievers – Zechariah, Uriah and the Maccabees, for example, not to mention John the Baptist, Stephen, James the son of Zebedee and many others in the new Testament. They did not complain at such an end but were willing to endure it. Others put up with long labors without complaining, for example, Noah who spent a hundred years building his ark, and Moses, who took forty years to lead his people out of slavery and into the promised land.” [Saint Bede the Venerable (ca. A.D. 700), *Concerning the Epistle of St. James*]

Gospel - Matthew 11:2-11

Last week we heard John the Baptist announce the coming of the messiah. This week we hear Jesus affirm that announcement.

² When John (the Baptist) heard in prison

Matthew postpones the explanation of why John the Baptist is imprisoned until the story of his death (Matthew 14:3-12) [for publicly rebuking Herod Antipas for his adulterous and incestuous marriage with Herodias (ex-wife of his brother Herod Philip)]. According to Josephus (*Antiquities of the Jews* 18.5.2§119) the prison was in the palace-fortress of Machaerus, built by Herod the Great on the desolate heights of Moab near the east central shore of the Dead Sea.

of the works of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to him ³ with this question, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?"

The way this is phrased it sounds like they are asking about the nature of Jesus' messiahship, it may well have been an inquiry as to whether he was a divine messenger like Elijah; but the most likely interpretation is that John knew that Jesus was the Messiah (see Matthew 3:13-17). John sent his disciples to Jesus so that they could shed their mistaken notions about the kind of Messiah to expect, and come to recognize Jesus.

⁴ Jesus said to them in reply, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them.

Recall our first reading from Isaiah 35:5-6. Although this is not a formal claim of messiahship, these are allusions to the phenomena in the Old Testament which were associated with the messianic era. Note that it is not a messiahship of judgement and wrath, nor the establishment of an empire over all the kingdoms of the earth, nor a war of extermination against the enemies of the elect people. It is a messiahship of the healing of ills and the conferring of blessing.

⁶ And blessed is the one who takes no offense at me."

The messiahship of healing and blessing was not the messiahship which the people, including the disciples, expected.

⁷ As they were going off, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John,

Jesus gives testimony about John the Baptist; first in a set of six rhetorical questions, then in three positive assertions about him.

"What did you go out to the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? ⁸ Then what did you go out to see? Someone dressed in fine clothing? Those who wear fine clothing are in royal palaces. ⁹ Then why did you go out? To see a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a

prophet.

The common Jewish belief is that there has been no prophecy in Israel since the last of the Old Testament prophets, Malachi. The coming of a new prophet was eagerly awaited and Jesus agrees that John is a prophet, and much more!

¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written: 'Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you; he will prepare your way before you.'

See Malachi 3:1; Exodus 23:20. John is the long awaited precursor of the one who will bring in the new and final age.

¹¹ Amen, I say to you, among those born of women there has been none greater than John the Baptist;

This makes John the Baptist the last and greatest of the prophets, even greater than Moses.

yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

John lived and worked before the messianic reign. Therefore, even the least in the messianic reign, who will have the light of the gospel and the communication of the power of faith, will accomplish greater works than John.