

Third Sunday of Advent, December 11, 2016

Readings: Isaiah 35:1-6 James 5:7-10 Matthew 11:2-11

The Third Sunday of Advent continues to prepare us for the coming of the Lord Jesus among us. During this special time of Advent, we are called to embrace a holy mind so that we may perceive for the benefit of our spiritual growth the true spiritual meaning of the Words of God given to us. The readings of today tell us of the necessity to wait for the Lord and prepare our hearts to receive him. At the same time they invite us to discover who the messiah is and how we can identify him. This Sunday is called "Gaudete Sunday" from the first word of the Entrance Song in Latin, giving a call to rejoice. As a symbol of this rejoicing the penitential violet vestments are changed to rose colour. So, the Mass text and readings today are full of joy, especially the Entrance Song that tells us to rejoice in the Lord always and tells them to rejoice again because the Lord is near. In the first reading Prophet Isaiah sees new life in a once-barren land. God is coming to save his people. They can visualize the transformation and identify the presence of the Lord. In the second reading St James refers to farmers and prophets as examples of patient waiting. Christians can learn from them as they look for the coming of Christ and wait for him patiently. In the Gospel Jesus indirectly claims to be the Messiah. He points to the actions that exemplify the presence of the Messianic age. He praises John as a prophet and one even greater than a prophet, a person who prepared the way of the Lord.

The First Reading from the Book of Isaiah echoes the anticipation of God's chosen people. The people believed that God would come and save them from their worldly suffering. To them, God's coming was perceived as a second Exodus. In their perception of the coming of the promised Messiah, the people visualized a transformation of the physical world where the entire creation would rejoice. They envisioned blooming deserts that would manifest the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God. The scene he describes brings to mind the Garden of Eden. They visualized a revived people under the leadership of an eternal King who would arrive to save them and avenge them. There is a striking transformation taking place among them. They were once weak and feeble without the wisdom to rely on God's strength. Once more the weak hands and feeble knees would be made strong. Those who are physically blind, they would see again. Those who are deaf, they would hear again. They have no fear because God is with them and

the word of God reaches their hearts. God's people waited for a Redeemer who would bring them out of their exile, something similar to what was experienced in the Exodus from Egypt. What God was revealing to them was a different Exodus, salvation through the power of God.

The Second Reading from the Letter of James reminds Christians to be patient until the coming of the Lord. He tells them that waiting for Christ's coming requires patience. He asks them to have patience that does not lose hope, no matter how hard is the situation. He asks for a patience that is strong and at the same time gentle. It is a patience that is not supine and passive but very active. It is a patience that manifests a quiet which will give them strength. In those days, it was the common belief of the people that Jesus would return anytime, meaning during the life of the generation that lived in the days of the Lord. Awaiting the glorious return of the Lord Jesus, some of the faithful had sold everything they owned and gave the money away. Others had quit their jobs and sat around, just waiting. James finds a helpful example at hand. The farmer has to wait for various processes of nature to take place as he awaits his crops. They are not to lose heart just like the farmer in the water scarce Holy Land has to wait patiently for the rains to come to bring a better yield. He tells them how they have to wait: by not to grumbling against one another, so that they may not be judged. For the Judge is standing at the doors. Here James makes a general reference to the prophets. They suffered hardships and needed patience as they waited for God's word to move the people to repent.

In the Gospel of today taken from Matthew we find ourselves at the mid-point in Jesus' ministry. This passage given to us is about discovering the identity of Jesus as well as that of John the Baptist. Already John the Baptist had been arrested. He had accused King Herod of doing something immoral, namely, marrying his brother's wife while his brother was still living. While in prison, John hears about things Jesus had done but he had not personally witnessed them. John knows that he is the precursor to the messiah and he does not fully know that Jesus is the real messiah. So he sends some of his disciples to Jesus with a question whether he is truly the Messiah who is to come, or did they have to wait for another. Whether John really wanted to know for his own sake or whether it was really for the benefit of his disciples is not clear. After all, John had already proclaimed Jesus at the River Jordan and said he was not worthy to unloose the thongs of Jesus' sandals. "The one who is to come" is, of course, the

long-expected Messiah. It is also possible that John too was expecting a messiah who was more aggressive than Jesus was. Jesus did not do that nor did he fulfill other commonly held expectations about which the Messiah would be and what he would do.

Jesus does not offer a clear yes or no response to John's question. Instead drawing mostly from the Prophet Isaiah, Jesus describes the messianic age as having begun with his preaching and his works. He informs the disciples of John to go back and tell what they heard and saw namely, the blind have their sight restored, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life and the Good News is being proclaimed to the poor. They are to identify the Messiah through his word and deeds. Jesus shows them that he is the Good News and he is the Light of the world. John in his Gospel tells us that Jesus is the true light, which enlightens everyone, and he has come into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. These actions are available to all to see and hear and he also adds what is almost an afterthought. Blessed are those who are not scandalized by Jesus. Here Jesus in effect is saying "Yes, I am the one who is to come. I am the Messiah, the Christ, and the Saviour King of Israel."

After establishing his own identity and what might have seemed like a rebuke to John the Baptist, Jesus offers a strong affirmation. There are a few men to whom Jesus paid so tremendous a tribute as he did to John the Baptist. He shows them that John was the person who spoke on God's behalf in shaping the moral character of Judaism. Despite his emaciated look, rags, and imprisonment, Jesus gave him great praise. John was a strong-willed person totally committed to his prophetic call. However, Jesus goes even further than this by indicating that John was more than a prophet. Making reference to the prophet Malachi, Jesus declares that John is the precursor to the Messiah. Malachi said this in reference to the role of Elijah who was to return before the coming of the final time. John now assumes that role. John the Baptist is presented by Jesus as one of the greatest persons ever born. However, that still places John in the former age. He indeed missed the privilege being born into the age of Christ, a privilege that has been made available to us. The current age is the age of the Kingdom of Heaven

and the least member of it is greater than John the Baptist. This is not a criticism of John. It is the good news about the kingdom of heaven, which is now present due to the teaching and action of Jesus. We could do well to emulate John in preparing ourselves for Jesus to become really part of our lives.

Jesus says that John was a prophet and yet more than a prophet. A prophet is a person who tells truth about God. A prophet is two things, namely, he is the man with a message from God and he is the man with a courage to deliver this message. Prophet is a man with God's wisdom in his mind, God's truth on his lips and God's courage in his heart. John was indeed such a prophet. Yet we see John was a strong person. He was a man of integrity. He was not one of the rich and famous. Yet many people went out to hear him, to be challenged by him, to have their lives radically changed by his words. He fully lived his vocation to prepare the way of the Lord.

While the Gospel speaks of the Messiah already here, we at this very time are, in a sense, still waiting in anticipation. Jesus, of course, is already present and working through his Body, the Christian community, the Church. But he still has to come more fully into our own lives. As the Opening Prayer suggests, we need to "experience the joy of salvation" - that power of healing and wholeness which Jesus can bring into our lives. This is something each one of us has to do and what we as a community also have to do. We feel that there are still many, including Christians, who have not yet experienced the deep joy of becoming complete in Christ. The first coming of the Lord was accompanied by miracles that helped the people of the time to believe in the messenger of God. The same will be true at the second coming of the Lord. As the Gospel of Matthew says: "This gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come." God however, from the beginning prepared prophets and finally John the Baptist to proclaim his coming. This is because Christ wanted to be desired by all and every one waited for his coming. Even today God wants all the men and women of the earth to profoundly desire the coming of the Savior and to await him with patience. But among these men and women, there are some whom God has especially chosen to be the witnesses of this necessary and voluntary desire, as he himself says: 'Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way before thee.'

If there is one holy woman who desired the coming of Christ with all her heart, it is truly the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, she who brought into the world the Son of God! Her desire was immense, and it surpassed, without any doubt, that of John the Baptist, whose desire nonetheless exceeded that of all the other men and women of his time. But at the same time, the humility of Mary was so great, forever surpassing that of anyone else, that she truly considered herself to be the last of all the servants of God... There is no doubt that when Jesus spoke of the "least", the person he thought of was Mary, his Mother. Today we are called to prepare the way for Jesus to come into our own hearts but also to prepare other people's hearts so that they, too, may experience the joy of salvation that healing, wholeness and holiness which meaning to our lives. But Isaiah tells us that God's glory is really extraordinary glory is God's compassionate love. This love is truly glorious in the way it goes beyond anything we could imagine or realistically hope for from God. So we see God's glory whenever we have an intimation of the awesome greatness of God. We experience God's when we know how much God wants us to have the fullness of joy. So let's pray together now both in thanks for this glory and in commitment to help make it more visible.

During my second month of college, our professor gave us a pop quiz. I was a conscientious student and had breezed through the questions until I read the last one: 'What is the first name of the woman who cleans the school?' Surely this was some kind of joke. I had seen the cleaning woman several times. She was tall, dark-haired and in her 50's, but how would I know her name? I handed in my paper, leaving the last question blank. Just before class ended, one student asked if the last question would count toward our quiz grade. 'Absolutely,' said the professor. 'In your careers, you will meet many people. All are significant. They deserve your attention and care, even if all you do is smile and say 'hello.' I've never forgotten that lesson. I also learned her name was Dorothy.

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