

4th Sunday of Advent - B

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

Anticipation and preparedness are the watchwords for Advent. Anticipation of the celebration of the birth of our Lord some 2000 years ago and the festivities, gifts, parties and family get-togethers which accompany that celebration. Preparedness because we are reminded that Jesus will come at the end of the world (the parousia) and all will be judged – not just on whether they believed or not, but how they have lived out their belief. Are the end times near? No one knows but the Father. We must always be ready because our personal parousia can come at any time.

1st Reading - 2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14a, 16

The two books of Samuel were originally one book which forms a continuation of the deuteronomic history of God's chosen people. The book is first dominated by Samuel, the last of the Judges, who struggles to keep Israel faithful to Yahweh under increasing pressure from the Philistines. Defeats and the loss of the ark of the covenant, symbol of Yahweh's protection, show that Israel needs a new kind of leadership – a king. Samuel anoints the first two kings, Saul and his successor, David. Saul constructs the beginnings of a stable monarchy but incurs divine displeasure and ends his rule in fits of black despondency and murderous hatred of David.

In the second book, the book from which our reading today comes, David is installed as king of Judah, and later as king of Israel as well. The twelve tribes are reunited under one leader. The reunited Israel then enjoys its most glorious period for it is, briefly, a major power in the Near East. Most important, however, is that David is the model for all kingship in Israel. He is a forceful yet attractive character, very human in his failings but passionate and intimate in his devotion to Yahweh. To him and to his line is promised endless rule, the basis of all future hope for a Messiah. This is our reading for today.

7:1 When King David was settled in his palace, and the LORD had given him rest from his enemies on every side, ² he said to Nathan the prophet, "Here I am living in a house of cedar, while the ark of God dwells in a tent!"

The peace which followed the victories over the Philistines had enabled David to arrange the bringing of the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem where it resides in a tabernacle (tent). Nathan is the senior religious advisor of David's court.

³ Nathan answered the king, "Go, do whatever you have in mind, for the LORD is with you."

⁴ But that night the LORD spoke to Nathan and said: ⁵ "Go, tell my servant David, 'Thus says the LORD: Should you build me a house to dwell in?"

God equates His presence with the ark of the covenant. The ark is the sign of Yahweh's covenant with His people and their protection against every coercive power. The ark was carried before the

troops when they entered into battle.

^{8b} It was I who took you from the pasture and from the care of the flock to be commander of my people Israel. ⁹ I have been with you wherever you went, and I have destroyed all your enemies before you. And I will make you famous like the great ones of the earth. ¹⁰ I will fix a place for my people Israel; I will plant them so that they may dwell in their place without further disturbance. Neither shall the wicked continue to afflict them as they did of old, ¹¹ since the time I first appointed judges over my people Israel. I will give you rest from all your enemies. The LORD also reveals to you that he will establish a house for you.

This house is not the promise of a building, but of a dynasty, the House of David.

¹² And when your time comes and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your heir after you, sprung from your loins, and I will make his kingdom firm.

The assurance of divine favor is extended to the dynasty.

^{14a} I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.

This is covenant language, they will be part of God's family. David didn't build the Temple to house the ark of the covenant, his son Solomon is the one chosen by God for this task. This is not a rejection of David, but a glorification of him through his son – no parent feels rejected when their child accomplishes great things.

¹⁶ Your house and your kingdom shall endure forever before me; your throne shall stand firm forever.'"

This oracle is the earliest statement of the belief in the eternity of the dynasty of David, and is the root of the messianic expectation of the rule of David.

2nd Reading - Romans 16:25-27

Our second reading today is the final three verses of Saint Paul's letter to the Romans. The letter was written to a congregation which had not been founded by Saint Paul, but was one which he anticipated visiting. The congregation is primarily composed of converted Jews and it is from the viewpoint of a former Pharisee that Saint Paul writes.

In our reading today, we find a new and different approach to the Jewish Scriptures: the great mystery of God, gradually unveiled in the course of human history, is now fully understood in the light of Jesus' passion, death and resurrection.

²⁵ Now to him who can strengthen you,

Saint Paul blesses God, who assures the gospel of Christ to human beings.

according to my gospel

This is the good news which Saint Paul makes known.

and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret for long ages ²⁶ but now manifested through the prophetic writings

The Old Testament writings that bear on the mystery mentioned – such as our first reading.

“By saying this Paul is releasing the weak person from fear. For this secret was contained in the law. Indeed, it is what the law was all about. We cannot ask why it should be disclosed now, for to do this would be to call God to account. We ought not to behave like busybodies but instead be content with what we have been given.” [Saint John Chrysostom (ca. A.D. 391), *Homilies on the Epistle to the Romans* 27]

and, according to the command of the eternal God,

Saint Paul may well be alluding to his commission as an apostle.

made known to all nations to bring about the obedience of faith,

Saint Paul sees faith as a process that begins with hearing and ends with a personal commitment and submission. This is what we Catholics call “faith and works.” It is interesting that the first and last mention of “faith” in Saint Paul’s letter to the Romans is expressed in terms of “obedience of faith” (Romans 1:5 and 16:26).

²⁷ to the only wise God,

“Do not think that Paul said this in disparagement of the Son. For if all the things whereby His wisdom was made apparent were done by Christ and nothing was done without Him, it is quite plain that the Son is equal to the Father in wisdom also. The word ‘only’ is used in order to contrast God with every created being.” [Saint John Chrysostom (ca. A.D. 391), *Homilies on the Epistle to the Romans* 27]

through Jesus Christ be glory forever and ever. Amen.

The climax of the doxology. Praise is paid to God the Father through the Son, Jesus the Christ.

Gospel - Luke 1:26-38

Saint Luke was a Syrian of Antioch. He was neither an apostle nor an eyewitness of Jesus’ earthly life. He wasn’t even a prominent figure in the apostolic Church. He was a physician and a companion or collaborator of Saint Paul. Although Saint Luke is believed to have derived his gospel (and the Acts of the Apostles) from Saint Paul, it bears little reflection of Saint Paul’s theology as reflected in his letters. This has led scholars to theorize that Saint Luke’s association with Saint Paul was early, before Saint Paul’s theology was fully developed, before Saint Paul engaged in serious letter writing, and before the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). A more likely answer

is that the gospel message is like a brilliant jewel, and each individual approaches that jewel by viewing a different facet. The Holy Spirit has guided each of the sacred writers as they wrote, writing in terms with which they were familiar, and ensuring that each writer taught no theological error, no matter in what style he wrote.

Only two gospels contain what are known as the infancy narratives of Jesus. Today we hear the story of the Annunciation from Saint Luke's gospel. If it sounds familiar, it is because we last heard it a couple of weeks ago on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception.

²⁶[T]he angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth,

At the time of the annunciation, Nazareth was an obscure little town of some 150 people. It is believed to derive its name from the Hebrew word *neser* which means "shoot." Thus, Jesus comes from the shoot of Jesse (Isaiah 11:1).

²⁷ to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph,

The name Joseph means "may Yahweh add."

of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary.

The name Mary means "excellence."

²⁸ And coming to her, he said, "Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you." ²⁹ But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

Mary has been told that God is with her, and most importantly, she is full of grace. As far as she is concerned, she has done nothing spectacular which would warrant a visit from an angel with this sort of greeting. She is puzzled.

³⁰ Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus.

Jesus, in Hebrew, is *Yeshua* (Joshua). It means "Yahweh saves."

³² He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, ³³ and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Mary's future son is described with language ordinarily reserved for God's redeeming presence among His people: "Son of the Most High" (Genesis 14:19ff; Sirach 24:2), "everlasting king" (Genesis 21:33; Daniel 12:7; Psalm 24:7, 10; 97:1).

³⁴ But Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?"

The angel has said "you shall conceive" not "you have conceived," it is future tense. Mary is espoused to Joseph. If a "normal" married life was planned, the question makes no sense. If she,

on the other hand was a consecrated virgin, then “normal” marital relations were not planned and the question becomes reasonable. The *Gospel of the Birth of Mary* (not considered inspired, but possibly relating some historical information), says that Mary entered the Temple at the age of three and lived with other virgins in the apartments of the Temple until the age of fourteen. “At that time the high priest made a public order. That all the virgins who had public settlements in the temple, and were come to this age, should return home, and, as they were now of a proper maturity, should, according to the custom of their country, endeavor to be married. To which command, though all the other virgins readily yielded obedience, Mary the Virgin of the Lord alone answered she could not comply with it. Assigning these reasons, that both she and her parents had devoted her to the service of the Lord; and besides, that she had vowed virginity to the Lord, which vow she was resolved never to break through by lying with a man” (*The Lost Books of the Bible*, Bell Publishing Company, New York, 1979, page 21).

³⁵ And the angel said to her in reply, "The holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.

This reminds us of how God showed Himself to the people in the tabernacle (Exodus 40:34) and the Jerusalem Temple (1 Kings 8:10).

Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. ³⁶ And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren;

This provides a link with the annunciation story of Elizabeth which preceded this one (Luke 1:11-13) and also lays the groundwork for the story of the Visitation which is to follow (Luke 1:39-56).

³⁷ for nothing will be impossible for God."

Mary's virginity reveals a new depth of meaning: complete trust and obedience before God.

³⁸ Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word."

This is a differential form of the word used in the Our Father: “Thy will be done.”

Then the angel departed from her.