

2nd Sunday of Advent – Cycle 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

Advent is really a season in two 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 40:1-5, 9-11

The prophet Isaiah spoke words of encouragement to his people who would be in exile years after Isaiah prophesied. He wrote "Comfort, give comfort to my people, says your God." Isaiah lived and wrote around 750 B.C., Israel (the Northern Kingdom) was deported in 722 B.C. and Judah (the Southern Kingdom) was deported in 605-586 B.C.) Cyrus of Persia began defeating the Babylonian armies in 538 B.C. The prophet points out the hope (which was later realized) that under Persian rule the Jewish people may be returned to their homeland (Isaiah 44-45). They will build "a highway for our God." In this "highway builder" role they will be preparing the way for their Lord. In the gospel reading we will study today, Mark quotes this passage from Isaiah in introducing John the Baptist.

As Christians we are also called to be highway builders preparing the way for Christ to enter more fully into our lives. We are proclaimers of "glad tidings."

During the time of Isaiah, conquered peoples were often put to work building roads for the victors. In the process of road building they would be filling in the valleys and cutting down the high places to make the road smoother. Sometimes roads would be built especially for the victorious ruler to ride in triumph. This would become the "king's way." The Jews in Babylon dreamed of the day when they would build their own "king's way" back to their homeland. It would be Yahweh, their king, who would ride triumphantly at the head of their pilgrimage home. It is of this dream that Isaiah writes today in the

beginning of the part of his book which is known as the “Book of Comfort” (Isaiah 40-55).

40:1 Comfort, give comfort to my people, says your God.

This is an expression of the covenant bond between them.

2 Speak tenderly

Literally, “speak to the heart.” In Hebrew anthropology the heart was considered to be the organ of reasoning. God is attempting to convince Israel of His concern.

to Jerusalem,

This is not a place, but a people, the chosen people.

and proclaim to her that her service is at an end, her guilt is expiated; Indeed, she has received from the hand of the LORD double for all her sins.

This is not an excess of divine anger, it proclaims a completion of the purification process of sorrow. A new era is dawning, inaugurated by God’s Word. A word is formed deep within the mind and heart of God and achieves its effects only when received just as personally within man.

3 A voice cries out:

Someone speaks up from the celestial assembly. This voice says that the Lord Himself is about to lead a new exodus through the desert.

In the desert prepare the way of the LORD!

A manner of life for men and for God – there can be two ways, the ways of good and of evil. John the Baptist is to announce “the way of the Lord” (Mark 1:3, our gospel reading for today) and Jesus Himself declares that He is the Way (John 14:6). Christianity, therefore, is called simply “the way.”

Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God! 4 Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill shall be made low; The rugged land shall be made a plain, the rough country, a broad valley. 5 Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,

God’s redeeming presence. In the Old Testament times this was a reference to the Temple.

and all mankind shall see it together; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

This new theophany is not restricted to the Temple, but is worldwide. In Hebrew, “all

mankind” is literally “all flesh.”

⁹ Go up onto a high mountain, Zion, herald of glad tidings; Cry out at the top of your voice, Jerusalem, herald of good news!

The glorious Jerusalem is no longer emasculated with sensuousness and hypocrisy, but is hailed as the home of God on earth and the center of redemption.

Fear not to cry out and say to the cities of Judah: Here is your God! ¹⁰ Here comes with power the Lord GOD, who rules by his strong arm;

The sacred author overlooks the Davidic pretenders to the throne and sees only one king, Yahweh.

Here is his reward with him, his recompense before him. ¹¹ Like a shepherd he feeds his flock; in his arms he gathers the lambs, Carrying them in his bosom, and leading the ewes with care.

Note the easy transition from king to shepherd. Yahweh is a shepherd-king, who attracts and even carries His people.

2nd Reading - 2 Peter 3:8-14

The epistle readings of Advent focus on life in the interim time between the resurrection and the fulfillment of the reign of Christ. We live in semi-darkness until the light of Christ dawns more fully in our lives. But we must live as if the lights will come on in their highest intensity at any moment.

⁸ But do not ignore this one fact, beloved,

The day of the parousia must not be overlooked or disregarded.

that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years like one day.

A quotation from Psalm 90:4 (89:4 in the Douay Rheims translation). Seen also as the delayed judgment of Adam. Although in Genesis 2:17 God says “On the day you eat it you will die ...”, Adam lived for another thousand years.

“Since it is written concerning the day of judgment that a thousand years will be like one day, who can tell whether we shall spend days, months or even years in that fire?” [Saint Caesar of Arles (after A.D. 542), *Sermons* 179]

⁹ The Lord does not delay his promise, as some regard “delay,” but he is patient with you, not wishing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.

When God's providence to bless and judge is attacked, several typical arguments were used: 1) A provident God could not make useless or harmful creatures; 2) God's foreknowledge would destroy human freedom; 3) God is slow to reward the just and punish the wicked. By harping on God's delay, heterodox Greeks and Jews argued against God's future judgment. God's delay should not be seen as an argument against Him, but as divine forbearance to sinners – He desires all to be saved.

10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief,

When no one expects it

and then the heavens will pass away with a mighty roar and the elements will be dissolved by fire, and the earth and everything done on it will be found out.

The “mighty roar” is possibly the trumpet and archangel's cry mentioned in 1 Thessalonians 4:16 (32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, cycle A) or the roar of the fire of judgment (1 Corinthians 3:12-14).

11 Since everything is to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought (you) to be, conducting yourselves in holiness and devotion,

Doctrine affects life, so reference is made to moral behavior consonant with belief in God's just judgment. We are to live lives of holiness and reverence for God so that we may stand before Him on that final day.

“As you wait for the end of all things, you must live holy lives according to the three laws – the Old Testament, the New Testament and the law of nature – and you must keep faith in the Trinity, which is the law of godliness.” [Hilary of Arles (ca A.D. 428), *Commentary on 2 Peter*]

12 waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved in flames and the elements melted by fire.

How different are believers and scoffers: believers await and hasten the day (we ask for this in the mystery of faith in the Eucharistic prayer at Mass), while scoffers mock its delay and disregard it.

13 But according to his promise we await new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

We await the heavenly Jerusalem. Purified by fire, only saints will share in God's kingdom of justice, while the wicked will be forever doomed.

14 Therefore, beloved, since you await these things, be eager to be found without spot or blemish before him, at peace.

Gospel - Mark 1:1-8

Our attention turns to John the Baptist, who prepared the way for Jesus. If we are to move toward the kingdom of God, we have to confront the way we live our lives. Judgment and confrontation are the seed beds of change.

“Note that Mark mentions nothing of the nativity or infancy or youth of the Lord. He has made his Gospel begin directly with the preaching of John.” [Saint Augustine of Hippo (ca. A.D. 400), *The Harmony of the Evangelists* 2,6,18]

1:1 The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ (the Son of God).

Mark is the only writer to title his book a “gospel.” By calling his book “the gospel” Saint Mark means that it is not primarily an account about Jesus but a proclamation of the Risen Christ in which He is again made present. What follows is the good news, which re-presents Jesus the Messiah and Son of God in incidents taken from tradition regarding His earthly ministry through to His resurrection. Some manuscripts omit “Son of God.”

2 As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: “Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you; he will prepare your way.

This is not from Isaiah, but from Malachi 3:1. The messenger is identified in Malachi 4:5 (Malachi 3:23 in New American and New Jerusalem translations) as Elijah, he is the one who is to come to purify Israel before the Day of Yahweh. This is why the Jews, even to this day, always set a place for Elijah at the Passover table.

3 A voice of one crying out in the desert: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.’”

This portion is from Isaiah, our first reading.

4 John (the) Baptist appeared in the desert proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Participation in John’s ritual of Baptism expressed a person’s willingness to change and God’s willingness to forgive sins before the coming of God’s kingdom.

“Since the Victim had not been offered, nor had the Holy Spirit yet descended, of what kind was this remission of sins? ... Fittingly therefore, when he had said that he came ‘preaching the baptism of repentance,’ he adds, ‘for the remission of sins’; as if to say: he persuaded them to repent of their sins, so that later they might more easily receive pardon through believing in Christ. For unless brought to it by repentance, they would not seek for pardon. His baptism therefore served no other end than as a preparation for belief in Christ.” [Saint John Chrysostom (A.D. 370), *Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew* 10,2]

⁵ People of the whole Judean countryside and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they acknowledged their sins.

Josephus (*Antiquities* 18.52'116-119), a first century Jewish historian, also describes John as a preacher of repentance who used baptism and attracted large crowds.

⁶ John was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist.

He was dressed similar to Elijah (*2 Kings* 1:8). According to *Zechariah* 13:4, the hair shirt was the garment of a prophet.

"John, too, wears a leather girdle about his loins; and there was nothing soft or effeminate in Elijah, but every bit of him was hard and virile. He, too, certainly was a shaggy man." [Saint Jerome (ca. A.D. 415), *Homily On The Exodus* 91]

He fed on locusts and wild honey.

The motivation for this unusual diet may have been ritual purity rather than self-depravation. According to *Leviticus* 11:22, locusts and grasshoppers were clean animals. It could also be the food of a nomad – one who depended upon God's bounty rather than raising food for himself.

⁷ And this is what he proclaimed: "One mightier than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of his sandals.

The work of a servant or slave

⁸ I have baptized you with water; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

In the manual of discipline found in the dead sea scrolls it says "then (in the season of divine visitation) God shall purify with His truth all man's deeds and will refine for Himself the body of man, rooting out every spirit of iniquity from the midst of his flesh and cleansing it of all impurity with a holy spirit. Like waters of purification he shall pour over him the spirit of truth." Such background for this verse would explain why it is immediately followed by the episode of Jesus' own baptism and His temptation by Satan.

"Neither repentance avails without grace, nor grace without repentance; for repentance must first condemn sin, that grace may blot it out. So then John, who was a type of the law, came baptizing for repentance, while Christ came to offer grace." [Saint Ambrose of Milan (ca. A.D. 380), *Epistle* 84]