

3rd 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

For the past two 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 pre-councilar 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 61:1-2a, 10-11

Our first reading today points toward the new day that the Lord promises His faithful people. Isaiah points to the joy he feels because he has been commissioned by God to announce the wonderful rewards which await the faithful.

61:1 The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted;

We normally think of kings and priests being anointed. Here, the term is linked with preaching and hearing; it designates an interior enlightening to know God's word, and a strengthening to follow it.

he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;

The word translated as "liberty" can also be translated as "light."

2a to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,

See Leviticus 25:10-13. In the year of favor, the jubilee year, the land reverts to the Creator, who distributes it equally and bountifully. The land was to lie fallow, property which had been seized, borrowed, or rented was to be returned to its rightful owners. Slaves were freed and debts were

either remitted or suspended.

and the day of vengeance of our God;

God repairs the injured force of messianic salvation.

¹⁰ I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

Jerusalem celebrates the fulfillment of love between herself and Yahweh. Throughout the Bible the relationship between the Chosen People and Yahweh is described in marital terms; sometimes in blissful terms but many times in adulterous terms. Our covenant relationship with God is also described in marital terms; the marriage feast of the Lamb in Revelation 19 for example.

¹¹ For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring forth before all the nations.

Justice springs from the earth, but the Lord God remains the source of all life.

2nd Reading - 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

As we look forward to Christ's arrival, both at Christmas and at the parousia, we listen to Saint Paul's advice on how we are to wait for this arrival.

¹⁶ Rejoice always.

Joy is a fruit of the Spirit.

¹⁷ Pray without ceasing.

Prayer proceeds from the Spirit.

¹⁸ In all circumstances give thanks,

Thanksgiving and prayer are closely associated.

for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus.

God's plan for our sanctification and happiness is realized only through Christ.

¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit.

True manifestations of God's spirit must not be suppressed in the Church.

"We can thus see why Paul, not wanting the grace of the Spirit given to us to grow cold, exhorts us,

‘Do not quench the Spirit.’ The only way we can continue to be partakers of Christ is to cling until the end to the Holy Spirit, who was given to us at the beginning (see Matthew 10:22; Hebrews 3:5). Paul said ‘Do not quench’ not because the Spirit is under the power of men but because evil and unthankful men certainly do wish to quench the Spirit. Demonstrating their impurity, they drive the Spirit away by their unholy deeds.” [Saint Athanasius (ca. A.D. 367), *Festal Letters* 4,4]

²⁰ Do not despise prophetic utterances.

The inspired words of consolation and admonition spoken by members of the community in special contact with God; this is a transitory charism, not a special class of Christians (see 1 Corinthians 14:31).

²¹ Test everything; retain what is good.

The “distinguishing of spirits” is a necessary charism to deal with the inevitable risk of false spirits. All extraordinary manifestations of the spirit are to be tested.

²² Refrain from every kind of evil. ²³ May the God of peace himself

God is the source of full eschatological salvation. Sanctification is not only the will of God, it is also His work.

make you perfectly holy and may you entirely, spirit, soul, and body,

The whole human person. In Jewish anthropology, “spirit” essentially identifies the person as a creature; “soul” identifies the person as a vital being; and “body” identifies the person as a corporal and social being.

be preserved blameless for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

“In the wicked sin reigns over the soul, being settled as on its own throne in the mortal body, so that the soul obeys its lusts ... but in the case of those who have become perfected, the spirit has gained the mastery and put to death the deeds of the body. It imparts to the body of its own life and there arises a concord of the two, body and spirit, on the earth. ... But still more blessed is it if the three [i.e., spirit, soul and body] be gathered together in the name of Jesus, that this may be fulfilled, ‘May God sanctify you wholly, and may your spirit and the soul and body be preserved entire without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.’” [Origen (after A.D. 244), *Commentaries on Matthew* 14,3]

²⁴ The one who calls you is faithful, and he will also accomplish it.

This is an affirmation of God’s fidelity; a fidelity which was implied in the term “God of peace” (verse 23).

Gospel - John 1:6-8, 19-28

In last week’s gospel reading we heard of John the Baptist. We hear of him again this week. To better grasp the context of our reading today, we will begin reading from the first words of the

Gospel of John and continue through today's reading.

1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be. What came to be ⁴ through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race; ⁵ the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. ⁶ A man named John was sent from God.

The name John means "Yahweh is great."

⁷ He came for testimony, to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.

In contrast to the opening verses of this gospel where the eternity of the Word is proclaimed, John is introduced not as a messianic figure, but as a witness – a witness testifying to the temporality of creation. He is mentioned because, like the prophets of old and Jesus Himself, he was sent by God. Witness is one of the sacred writer's (Saint John's) fundamental ideas. Faith, and its converse, unbelief because of the influence of darkness, are the theme of the first half of this gospel.

⁸ He was not the light, but came to testify to the light.

Saint John is careful to point out here, and also elsewhere in our reading today, that John the Baptist is a witness to the light and not the light itself. This is because his position had been misinterpreted by some (see Acts 19:1-7).

¹⁹ And this is the testimony of John. When the Jews from Jerusalem

"Jews" is a term which John later applies to the leaders of the community who persecute Jesus.

sent priests and Levites

Those empowered under the Law to make religious decisions. The combination "priests and Levites" occurs only here in the New Testament.

(to him) to ask him, "Who are you?"

This is the question asked of Jesus in John 8:25 and 21:12 – Jesus answers "I am" while John answers twice "I am not."

²⁰ he admitted and did not deny it, but admitted, "I am not the Messiah."

This is the most important element in John the Baptist's answer. The messiah first appears as a future anointed agent of God in Daniel 9:25.

²¹ So they asked him, "What are you then? Are you Elijah?"

Expectation of Elijah's return was based on Malachi 3:1 and 4:5 (Malachi 3:1 and 3:23 in the New American and New Jerusalem translations), the messenger sent to prepare the Day of the Lord.

And he said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?"

Refers to Deuteronomy 18:18, the only prophet promised in the Torah.

He answered, "No." ²² So they said to him, "Who are you, so we can give an answer to those who sent us? What do you have to say for yourself?"

Having exhausted the obvious threats to their authority, they now demand that John identify himself; and by doing so, his mission).

²³ He said: "I am 'the voice of one crying out in the desert, "Make straight the way of the Lord,"" as Isaiah the prophet said."

In reply to the demand, John refuses to identify himself with any person at all; he is merely the “voice” of Isaiah 40:3 heralding the good news of salvation.

²⁴ Some Pharisees were also sent.

This may be another delegation doing the questioning now as the first group had been sent by the priests and Levites. The priests and Levites were not ordinarily Pharisees – it is also interesting that Pharisees had no authority to send a delegation.

²⁵ They asked him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah or Elijah or the Prophet?"

It would have been the Pharisees, watchmen as they were over traditional Jewish law and practice, who would have been particularly interested in and concerned with the baptism of John. Baptismal rites of various kinds were then in practice: the Jews baptized proselytes (new converts) and the Essenes baptized initiates into their community. The question is: What was the significance of John’s baptism of Jesus if He had disassociated Himself from the forerunners of the end times?

²⁶ John answered them, "I baptize with water; but there is one among you whom you do not recognize,

John the Baptist justifies his baptism in water as a preparation for the Messiah, who is already in Israel’s midst but who has not yet been revealed.

²⁷ the one who is coming after me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to untie."

Unfastening a sandal strap was the job of a slave – the one to come is so great that John doesn’t feel good enough to be His slave.

²⁸ This happened in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

It is called “Bethany across the Jordan” to distinguish it from the Bethany near Jerusalem. The exact place is unknown today, but the name means the “best place of crossing over.”