

4th Sunday of Advent - C

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 - Micah 5:1-4a

Micah is the last of the four prophets of the 8th century B.C. (the other three are Isaiah, Hosea and Jonah). The name means “who is like God” and the English equivalent is “Michael”. His preaching is concerned with sin and punishment, not with political or cultic matters. He is preoccupied with social justice and does not fear princes, prophets, or priests. Micah is concerned with the people’s rejection of God. Sin is the reason for the coming punishment.

In today’s reading we hear words of hope that focus on one who is to be born in Bethlehem and who will bring in the day of peace when all nations will look to Jerusalem.

[Thus says the LORD] ^{5:1} But you, Bethlehem-Ephrathah

Probably the same place, Bethlehem (see Ruth 4:11). It is the city of Jesse and of his son, David, who was chosen to be king of the twelve tribes of Israel. Matthew 2:5-6 shows how this text came to be interpreted.

too small to be among the clans of Judah, From you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel;

The Messiah will be a “ruler”.

Whose origin is from of old, from ancient times.

The Messiah has His origin from the formation of the world.

² (Therefore the Lord will give them up, until the time when she who is to give birth

The messianic king’s mother.

has borne, And the rest of his brethren shall return to the children of Israel.) ³ He shall stand

firm and shepherd his flock by the strength of the LORD, in the majestic name of the LORD, his God;

The king shall shepherd his flock as God's representative.

And they shall remain, for now his greatness shall reach to the ends of the earth; ⁴ he shall be peace.

Not bring, but be *shalom*.

2nd Reading - Hebrews 10:5-10

The sacrifices by the priest in the temple did not restore the people and bring them into oneness with God. Rather, it is the perfect offering of Christ that restores us. Jesus came to do the will of God perfectly. In that perfect obedience and in His suffering and death, He overcame the power of evil that separates us from God. Though we still fall into evil, we now have a bridge back to God. Verses 5 through 7 are drawn from Psalm 40:6-8 (Psalm 40:7-9 in the New American Bible). David prefigures Christ's sacrifice. The Psalm is now seen from the perspective of Christ.

⁵ For this reason, when he came into the world, he said: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire,

The requirement for these have their origin in the golden calf. Up until that time, it was not necessary to kill an animal (thus demonstrating rejection of the Egyptian gods) in order to approach God.

but a body you prepared for me;

Jesus became man so that His body would constitute the perfect sacrifice. This is the Greek (Septuagint) translation of Psalm 40:6 the Hebrew reads "ears you have dug for me" (to hear and obey God's will).

⁶ holocausts and sin offerings you took no delight in.

Along with the preceding sacrifices and offerings this covers the four main types of sacrifices: peace offerings (sacrifices), cereal offerings (offerings), holocausts (burnt offerings), and sin offerings.

⁷ Then I said, 'As is written of me in the scroll, Behold, I come to do your will, O God.'

When applying this to Jesus, read "covenant" for "will". He became the covenant meal which binds us together.

⁸ First he says, "Sacrifices and offerings, holocausts and sin offerings, you neither desired nor delighted in." These are offered according to the law.

As a result of the golden calf. The Levitical laws.

⁹ Then he says, “Behold, I come to do your will.”

A better translation is “covenant”.

He takes away the first to establish the second.

The Levitical law of the Sinai covenant has been taken away to establish the new covenant.

¹⁰ By this “will,” we have been consecrated through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ

A better translation is of “will” is “new covenant”. The Old Testament sin offering of the High Priest was offered annually on the Day of Atonement to consecrate (sanctify) the Holy places for another year through repudiation of the golden calf.

once for all.

Jesus died once and continues to make His offering in our behalf in heaven (Revelation 5:6). No longer is heaven closed to us but it is open for us to approach God directly. No longer are animal sacrifices required but instead we are called to present ourselves as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1). In the Mass we join into the heavenly presentation by re-presenting that sacrifice here on earth and joining it with the offering of ourselves – as the Eucharistic prayer says “Lift up your hearts. We lift them up to the Lord”.

Gospel - Luke 1:39-45

On the Sunday before Christmas we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus by noting the coming birth of His forerunner, John the Baptist. In this pre-birth story, Mary visits Elizabeth (the visitation).

³⁹ During those days Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste to a town of Judah,

This is not necessarily a demonstration of Mary’s charity and social concern. The theological meaning is that both mothers-to-be praise the God who is active in their lives and this allows Elizabeth’s child to be presented as the “precursor” of Mary’s child.

⁴⁰ where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the infant leaped in her womb,

The wrestling of Esau and Jacob in Rebekah’s womb (Genesis 25:22) presents a parallel to the leaping of John: such activity is a foreshadowing of future relationships. The context makes clear that by leaping, John recognizes his Lord, Jesus. There is a very significant parallel here between King David and John the Baptist; David brought the Ark of the Covenant to “a town in Judea” and he also danced (leaped) before it. John is leaping before the ark of the New Covenant. One interpreter even suggests that John is prostrating himself before Jesus.

and Elizabeth, filled with the holy Spirit, ⁴² cried out in a loud voice and said,

In words recalling Jael's (Judges 5:24) and Judith's (Judith 13:18) liberation of their people, Elizabeth praises Mary, whose contribution to liberation is the birth of the bringer of peace. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit Elizabeth is empowered to interpret the leaping of John. A 6-month old fetus has recognized a 4-day old zygote (to use the medical terms used today to avoid saying "baby") – who says life doesn't begin at conception!

"Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"

John has leapt in Elizabeth's womb because Mary is the ark carrying their Lord. "Lord" and "God" are used interchangeably by Elizabeth and Zechariah (and the Gospel writers) so that Elizabeth is really declaring that Mary is "Mother of God"; a title bestowed upon her by the Council of Ephesus in A.D. 431).

⁴⁴ For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy.

John's joy is the appropriate response to God's fulfillment of promise in Jesus.

⁴⁵ Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled."

Mary, as model believer, is praised for her trust in the fidelity of God. She has done God's will through her fiat. It is significant to note that Elizabeth, although older and bearing the child for which she had prayed a very long time, shows no animosity toward Mary and her child; readily submitting to the fact that her (Elizabeth's) child will be of lesser stature than Mary's. This must truly be the work of the Holy Spirit who has filled Elizabeth.