

2nd Sunday in 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

Advent is really a season in two parts, with the first two weeks concerned with the Lord's coming as Judge of all at the end of time and the second two weeks serving as the proximate preparation for His coming in the flesh. Our activities, like the Church's readings, should reflect this 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 - Baruch 5:1-9

This reading from the book of Baruch (which constitutes the entire fifth chapter) is similar to last week's reading from Zechariah. All the valleys will be raised and the mountains lowered "so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God" (Baruch 5:7). This is powerful poetry that provides us with images of the perfect day of the Lord. The Lord will provide His people with a smooth highway leading them back to their own land from the Babylonian captivity.

^{5:1} Jerusalem, take off your robe of mourning and misery; put on the splendor of glory from God forever:

Jerusalem removes her mourning garment (Baruch 4:20) and clothes herself in the garment of light that emanates from her Lord, who is presented as the sun rising in the east. This garment is described in the following verse.

² Wrapped in the cloak of justice from God,

The guarantee of the sum of harmony, security, and prosperity.

bear on your head the mitre that displays the glory of the eternal name. ³ For God will show all the earth your splendor: ⁴ you will be named by God forever the peace of justice, the glory of God's worship. ⁵ Up, Jerusalem! stand upon the heights; look to the east

The direction in which the sun rises.

and see your children gathered from the east and the west at the word of the Holy One, rejoicing that they are remembered by God. ⁶ Led away on foot by their enemies they left you: but God will bring them back to you borne aloft in glory as on royal thrones.

See Isaiah 49:22. The other nations now subject to Israel carry the Jewish communities dispersed outside Palestine home on portable thrones.

⁷ For God has commanded that every lofty mountain be made low, And that the age-old depths and gorges be filled to level ground, that Israel may advance secure

As in Isaiah 40:3-4, a road is leveled through the desert for the most direct march to Jerusalem.

in the glory of God.

The glory and splendor belong to the returning dispersed Jewish communities which reflects the light of the divine presence. Only God controls the sun, can appear in it for the exiles, and can lead them home basking in its light.

⁸ The forests and every fragrant kind of tree have overshadowed Israel at God's command;

As in Isaiah 41:18-19 the Arabian Desert by a miracle receives abundant rain, and the road home is adorned with miraculously fast-growing trees that require such rain. The fact that dry ground is rained on for the first time makes these rains the first fall rains. This suggests that the feast for which the dispersion returns is Tabernacles, though in fact the first rains normally come after Tabernacles.

⁹ For God is leading Israel in joy by the light of his glory, with his mercy and justice for company.

These Divine attributes are portrayed as attendants of the Lord – angels.

2nd Reading - Philippians 1:4-6, 8-11

Saint Paul writes to the people of Philippi with the same concern that we heard expressed in last week's second reading. The people must always be ready for "the Day of Christ" which can come at any time. If we are to be true to the Advent season we must emphasize the second coming of Christ before we move to the first coming in Bethlehem.

⁴ [I] pray always with joy

Joy is the underlying theme throughout Philippians.

in my every prayer for all of you, ⁵ because of your partnership for the gospel from the first day until now.

The Philippians have had a share in the gospel through their conversion, their support of Paul, and their own costly witness to the truth.

“I both glorify God and offer prayers for you. The fact that you are already advancing in excellence does not prevent my praying further for you.” [Saint John Chrysostom (A.D. 398-404), *Homilies on the Epistle to the Philippians*, 2,1,4]

⁶ I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus.

The parousia. When His task of subduing the world to God’s glory (Philippians 3:21) is complete, Christ will appear in glory to hand over the kingdom to the Father (1 Corinthians 15:24-28.)

⁸ For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

The Greek word *splanchna*, translated as “affection” denotes the inward organs (heart, lungs, liver) seen as the seat of deepest emotion (hence the saying “gut feeling”).

⁹ And this is my prayer: that your love may increase ever more and more in knowledge and every kind of perception, ¹⁰ to discern what is of value, so that you may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, ¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Righteousness for St. Paul is the right standing with God at the end times. Christian ethical life is the fruit of this relationship with God.

“Enjoy these gifts! Keep your faith uncontaminated! Present the fruit of righteousness to God, so that God will be celebrated by all.” [Theodoret of Cyr (ca. A.D. 450), *On Ephesians*, 1,11]

Gospel - Luke 3:1-6

John the Baptist is a key symbol of Advent preparation. The prophet Isaiah is quoted to show how John is preparing the people for Christ’s coming. When the Jews were held captive in Babylon, they built roads for their captors. A day would come, Isaiah wrote, when they would build a highway for their God to prepare the way for His coming. Valleys would be filled in, and hills would be lowered for the “king’s highway.” In a similar fashion, the Church says today, John the Baptist is calling on us to prepare a road so that Christ can come.

^{3:1} In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar,

The 15th year of Tiberius Caesar seems to be August/September A.D. 28-29.

when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea,

Pontius Pilate was prefect of Judea in A.D. 26-36.

and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene,

Herod, Philip and Lysanias were sons of Herod the Great. Even the power of someone as mighty as Herod the Great came to an end with his death, as the Romans carved up his kingdom and gave it to his sons. Herod here is Herod Antipas (4 B.C.-A.D. 39). Luke will have much to say about him in his Gospel, none of it good. Neither John nor Jesus fares well at Herod's hands.

² during the high priesthood of Annas

High priest from A.D. 6-15.

and Caiaphas,

Caiaphas was the son-in-law of Annas and high priest A.D. 18-37. These men held authority only because Rome so willed it. The high priests rejected John's baptism.

the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the desert.

Luke frequently associates desert with John. If the Qumranites lived in the desert awaiting God's deliverance, the fact that John also exercises his ministry in the desert may be an instance of Qumran influence on John.

³ He went throughout (the) whole region

Unlike the John the Baptist described in Mark, Luke's John the Baptist is an itinerant preacher.

of the Jordan,

Although one needs water for baptism, this factor does not necessarily explain the selection of the Jordan River. Is there a historical tradition here that John's baptism was associated with a covenant renewal before people passed over the Jordan into the "Promised land"?

proclaiming a baptism of repentance

A turning from sin and turning over a new leaf of model behavior.

for the forgiveness of sins,

The imagery here stems from the cancellation of economic debts and release from slavery or imprisonment (see Luke 5:31-32). Repentance and forgiveness of sins are Luke's treasured ways of detailing what Jesus the Christ has achieved for humanity.

⁴ as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah:

Quotes Isaiah 40:3-5. What John is about is in fulfillment of God's promise of a new exodus, which will be from the exile of death and sin and will be accomplished by Jesus, whose way John prepares. It should be noted that the Qumranites applied Isaiah 40:3 to themselves as they prepared the Lord's way by living in the desert, by studying the Law, and by separating themselves from outsiders.

“A voice of one crying out in the desert: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths. ⁵ Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low. The winding roads shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth, ⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

This may be seen as a metaphorical reference to radical changes in a person's lifestyle.