

Advent Season

Colour: purple

Third Sunday of Advent Year A

First Reading Isaiah 35.1

Joy of the Redeemed

1 The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus,

2 it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendour of Carmel and Sharon; they will see the glory of the LORD, the splendour of our God.

3 Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way;

4 say to those with fearful hearts, Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.

5 Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

6 Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.

7 The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.

8 And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness. The unclean will not journey on it; it will be for those who walk in that Way; wicked fools will not go about on it.

9 No lion will be there, nor will any ferocious beast get up on it; they will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there,

10 and the ransomed of the LORD will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

What's going on?

Isaiah gives us another prophetic vision, this time of joy and happiness. When God comes into the world, all the things which are wrong with the world can be put right. Isaiah imagines this as the parched desert land,

desperate for rain which bursts into flower when the rain comes. The whole of nature therefore welcomes the Lord when he comes. People who are afflicted are healed and sadness is washed away.

Isaiah also imagines this vision of the coming of God to be totally within the world as a spiritual journey, the Way of Holiness, in which those who believe absolutely in this vision can make their way into God's presence. Isaiah thinks of this as people singing for joy, their cares left behind, as they enter the Holy City to worship God. This vision of celebration, joy and redemption makes it perfect for Christmas, as we wait to celebrate the coming of Jesus Christ into the world.

Psalm 146 (145 Roman Catholic) 4-10

4 When their spirit departs, they return to the ground; on that very day their plans come to nothing.

5 Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God,

6 the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them— the LORD, who remains faithful for ever.

7 He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets prisoners free,

8 the LORD gives sight to the blind, the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down, the LORD loves the righteous.

9 The LORD watches over the alien and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.

10 The LORD reigns for ever, your God, O Zion, for all generations.

What's going on?

The psalmist reminds us of the promises of God. God's intention for the world is that those who suffer should be relieved of their suffering. God's world should be a world in which no one has lost their liberty or goes hungry. This is a picture of a dynamic, active God, the creator of all, who wants to redeem and save all who are lost or in trouble. This is the God who is coming to us at Christmas in the Incarnation of Jesus.

Second Reading James 5. 7-10

Patience in Suffering

7 Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains.

8 You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near.

9 Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!

10 Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

What's going on?

This letter tells Christians to be patient and wait to see what God is going to do, but at the same time expect Jesus at any moment. It is important to focus and not let little things become major distractions or you might miss what God is doing. Jesus is almost here, so now is not the time to stop concentrating on what God wants and preparing to meet Jesus.

Gospel Matthew 11. 2-11

2 When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples

3 to ask him, Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?

4 Jesus replied, Go back and report to John what you hear and see:

5 The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.

6 Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.

7 As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind?

8 If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces.

9 Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.

10 This is the one about whom it is written:

'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'

11I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

What's going on?

The people of Jesus' time knew their Bible very well indeed, so when Jesus sends news to John of who he is and what he has been doing, he refers directly back to the passage of Isaiah we have already heard. Jesus answers John's question by implying that it was he that Isaiah was talking about, he is making the vision of the better world that God wants come true.

The passage also falls into two halves, because while Jesus gives a message to John's disciples about who he is, he also tells the people around him about John. John is a messenger and a prophet whose task is to tell people about the coming of Jesus and to prepare them to meet him.

Why these passages?

As we approach Christmas, the readings tell us to focus more on Jesus' coming into the world and what he came to do. This Sunday is sometimes called Gaudete (Rejoice) Sunday and can be signified in some churches by using rose coloured vestments or a pink coloured candle in the Advent wreath rather than the usual purple colour. So what we hear in the readings is good news. Isaiah gives us this wonderful picture of the world blooming and people singing for joy, as the ills of the world are changed forever, and this theme of joyous expectation is threaded in the other readings. Jesus will come and really do these things to make the world a better place and change people's lives forever. The preparation is almost over and it will be wonderful when the Lord comes.