**SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT**

**6th December 2020**

**Notes on the Mass Readings**

**First Reading Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11**

These incomparable words encouraged the first exiles who had been freed from slavery and were at liberty to return from Babylon to Jerusalem. Not all wanted to return if they had married local wives, and this was the beginning of the Jewish Diaspora. But the prophet tried to reassure the doubters. God himself will lead them on a highway through the wilderness to a new life. They had been in slavery for 70 years and had only ever heard wistful stories from their grandparents about Jerusalem. Now this anonymous prophet - we call him Second Isaiah - gave us chapters 40-55 of the book Isaiah. (see postscript)

In his poetic vision the prophet hears a voice proclaiming to Jerusalem that her God is coming. The herald is urged to proclaim the good news openly in the towns of Judah. His message is to be: 'Here is your God.' By New Testament times this was paraphrased in the synagogues of Palestine as: 'The Kingdom of your God is revealed.'

In practice, the return from the exile, begun in 537 B.C. fell far short of the glowing picture painted here. Yet, it was not just *castles in the air*, for the return was a real opportunity for a fresh start, a re-creation.

Later generations of Jews had to look hard to see evidence of the prophecy and the message was sometimes interpreted in moral terms: the highway to be made straight became one's way of life; the Kingdom was to be prepared for by repentance.

The journey from Babylon, and the exodus from Egypt both passed through the desert and it was expected that the advent of the messianic age would spring out of the wilderness too. So both the Baptist and Jesus (Matthew 4;1-11) began their ministry in deserted places.

**Second Reading Second Letter of Peter 3:8-14**

It is most unlikely that what, in the New Testament, we call the Second Letter of Peter was actually written by the Apostle himself. It probably dates from circa 120 A.D. but written under his name. This was not an uncommon practice then, to say what you believe a historical figure would have said, had he been present. For us, the point is that the expected return of the Lord was still an issue, even ninety years after the Ascension which is why we use this passage for our second reading.

The writer says that after so long, we should expect sceptics who cast doubt on the Christian hope. He says that God’s time is reckoned differently to our timekeeping and that in fact he is being patient with us. (see Psalm 90:4) He is deliberately giving humanity time, *'not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance'* (v. 9). But the Day of the Lord will surely come, if unexpectedly (see Matthew 24:43). The just have nothing to fear.

**Gospel Mark 1:1-8**

The principle that underscores all the New Testament authors is that the Advent of Jesus was planned from pre-history. Therefore, evidence of this planning can be seen in the historical records if one knows where to look.

Mark opens his Gospel claiming to quote from the Isaiah passage we have just read. In fact the first sentence is not from Isaiah, but from Malachi (3;1) and Mark has also altered it to suit his purposes as well.

We must remember that in quoting from the Old Testament writings, the New Testament authors did so from memory, it being too difficult to access the rare manuscripts. Therefore, the words are often approximate, also depend on the translation remembered and frequently altered to make them more relevant. We would not approve such practices but they were common at the time.

Naturally the original had its own context, but Christians saw a secondary meaning, fulfilled in Jesus. I feel that it is very important to disabuse the widespread attitude of regarding the ‘scriptures’ as being lowered down from Heaven intact and flawless. I believe that we should recognise them as working documents of their own time and no different to contemporary literature. The authors, similarly, were men of their time with all the common prejudices and understanding. Their writings then have their own value as evidence as to what happened.

In his opening words, Mark makes his position clear in unequivocal language. He calls Jesus ‘*Christ, the Son of God’* and claims that he fulfilled the prophecy of our first reading made about 577 years before. Second Isaiah’s voice in the wilderness announcing God’s imminent presence becomes John (the Baptist) also in the wilderness announcing the advent of Jesus.

Apart from Malachi and II-Isaiah, there are allusions to many other Old Testament passages which Mark has in mind in this incident. He describes John the Baptist as living in the wilderness, dressed in animal skins with an unusual diet because that is how such a prophet was expected.

There was a belief that Elijah would return in animal skins (2 Kings 1;8) It was in the wilderness where God may be found (Jeremiah 2:3) and where he will renew his covenant with Israel (Hosea 2:16).

Water baptism was also a common ritual for symbolic cleansing, used daily at Qumran and in the reception of converts. Reference to it may be found in II-Isaiah and Joel where it was to be followed by baptism with the Spirit.

*For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants.* (Isaiah 44;3)

*And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.* (Joel 2;28-29)

Spirit in these passages meant the Life (or literally breath) of God, and did not carry the developed understanding of the Holy Spirit that we have. Baptism simply meant ‘immersion’ or ‘drowning’ and as one could be submerged in water, so one could be immersed in the life of God.

But Jesus took this established practice and gave it a new direction. Instead of simple cleansing, it became the sign of life and rebirth.

There are two elements to John’s preaching. One is the challenge to confess, repent and be symbolically cleansed. The second element was as a herald of Yahweh in person or a Messiah as anticipated in Jewish tradition.

But despite the confidence of the Evangelists, it is doubtful if John was quite so sure that Jesus was the fulfilment of his preaching because later from Herod’s prison he sent messengers to enquire. (Luke 17;18-23) But there is no doubt as to the main facts about John, for his message and martyrdom is attested, not only by the Gospels but also by the Roman historian, Josephus (Jewish Antiquities 18.116-119)

In fact, the whole account of Jesus being baptised by John is believable because from the beginning the disciples did not understand why Jesus was baptised at all. It is not something that would have been made up without a clear reason attached. The New Testament is vague on the subject, and we cannot not know for certain but I have a theory.

John the Baptist was baptising in the River Jordan. 1,250 years before Joshua had led the Israelites through the Jordan to a new life in a new home. Now, Joshua is simply the Hebrew for the Greek, ‘Jesus’ who similarly leads his people through Baptism into a new life. This is a connection which would have been readily understood at the time and would have been used in the instruction of catechumens.

Next week. we have John the Apostle’s account of the Baptist’s role in the story.

**Postscript**

(Chapters 1-39 are the work of the 8th century prophet, Isaiah, a contemporary of Amos, Hosea and Micah and resident in Jerusalem before its destruction.

Chapters 40-55 are the work of an anonymous prophet addressed to the Exiles in Babylon. This includes some of the finest literature in the Bible as well as a universalist vision.

Chapters 56-66 are a collection of miscellaneous material from several authors, usually under the name III-Isaiah and addressing the returned Exiles in Jerusalem. At some unknown time they were all included in one corpus.