**THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT**

**13th December 2020**

**First Reading Isaiah 61:1-2, 10-11**

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Today’s Old Testament reading in the Sunday Missal is divided into three paragraphs. The first one (vv.1-2) is in the voice of an anonymous prophet bringing good news of freedom and healing to all who suffer. It was this passage that Jesus appropriated to himself in his home synagogue of Nazareth (Luke 4;14-22) thus causing a riot. Jesus also alluded to this passage in his response to the Baptist’s enquiry from prison. (Matthew 11;2-6 and Luke 7;18-23)

In this way a passage, notable in its own right, has been given a new relevance. Who was the mysterious speaker of the Isaiah poem originally intended to be? The author? A future bearer of good tidings? The Servant of Yahweh? This Servant figure frequently recurs in II-Isaiah and this passage is suggestive of him, but without the actual name.

We cannot be sure. What matters for us is that Jesus made the prophecy his own. Thus, he laid down the important precedent that a passage with one meaning may have a new one hidden within it. He was the Spirit-anointed one who preached good news to the poor. He manifested in his person the tender quality of the promised mercy. The anticipated Messiah who was to come did show a gentle concern for people in their deepest need.

The second paragraph is the voice of the inhabitants of Jerusalem as a response to the voice. It became the model for the Magnificat that the Blessed Virgin recited during her visit to Elizabeth, when John the Baptist from her womb recognised Jesus in the womb of Mary. So the canticle is used for the Responsorial Psalm following the reading today. (Luke 1;46-54)

Then the third paragraph extends the good news to the nations, who recognise the revelation in their turn.

**Second Reading Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians 5:16-24**

In the words immediately preceding our reading Paul had urged the Thessalonians to respect their leaders and live in peace with one another. lie had exhorted them to admonish, encourage and help as the need arose - always in a spirit of patience.

Then, in vv. 16-22, he passes to the positive demands of Christian love. Believers must 'always seek to do good' and that not only within the community but 'towards all.' In particular he urges them to Christian joy, to prayer and thanksgiving. 'Rejoice always': this joy, of which Paul speaks more than once, is gift of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22).

A characteristic of Christian joy is that it can exist together with trials and sufferings; these can in fact give rise to joy in that they take one closer to Christ (see Acts 5:41). 'Pray without ceasing' (see Lk 18:1) - constant prayer is a quality of Christian life. Prayer will take the form of thanksgiving: an eloquent way of praising God for his goodness.

It is clear from 1 Corinthians 12 to 14 that charismatic gifts, while being evidence of the Spirit's presence in a community, could cause problems. The problem lay not in the gifts but in fact that some did not recognise that they were gifts. It appeared that the Corinthians lacked humility but paraded their gifts and the one they enjoyed more than any was glossolalia. This was a trance-like state uttering sounds of ecstasy, which was a feature of pagan practice and called ‘speaking in tongues’

Charismatics tended to give themselves airs. The answer was not in trying to stifle the gifts - that is what Paul means when in our reading he said *‘Never try to suppress the Spirit’* But what was needed was discernment: to know whether or not the glossolalia was the voice of the Spirit or not. In Corinth Paul had to defend the gift of prophecy, that is to say, inspired, forthright preaching, against those who had exaggerated the importance of tongues.

Prophecy, simply, is saying what God is saying to his people. Ideally, it includes what we understand as preaching. Glossolalia is worship under the influence of the Spirit and in Corinth was superior to Prophecy. We may suspect a similar situation in Thessalonica; at any rate, there were some who 'despised' prophesying. In conclusion, Paul moves beyond the specific area of spiritual gifts and bids his readers hold fast to whatever is good and hold off from all that is evil.

We may see as the theme of the second reading that the salvation promised in Christ, the process of redemption already at work among us, is a source of present joy and peace. Even though the Christian is still preparing for the final coming of Christ, it is not an anxious worrying time, but a quiet confident waiting.

Our prayer, to use the words of Paul (v. 23) is that the God of peace will keep us safe and blameless, spirit, soul and body, for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. After all, he who has called us to salvation is the faithful Father (v.24).

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

Last week we had Mark’s account of the Baptist witnessing to Jesus. This week we have the Apostle John’s version. John is some 25 years later than Mark and ideas have had time to mature. But it also means that the memory of the Baptist was that much more remote and he had become more of a legendary figure with his symbolic role correspondingly greater.

While Mark opened his Gospel with a brusque sentence, John opens his with a profound poem saying the same thing. The first seven lines of our reading comprise one verse of that poem, and introduce the two themes of ‘witness’ and ‘light’ which will continue like threads through the next 21 chapters. If the witness is the Baptist, then the light is Jesus.

The second part of the reading is John’s telling of the meeting of the Baptist with the Jewish establishment. By the time of John’s Gospel there were very few Jewish Christians, and they had consequently become associated with his enemies. So here they express doubts and scepticism later to become hostility.

More firmly even than Mark (1:7) John casts the Baptist in the role of witness. The Greek for witness is ‘martyr’ and in the interval between Mark and John the word had attained the association with violent death that we understand. The Baptist had certainly died for his outspokenness and became a pattern for Christians.

The first part of the passage which constitutes our reading is the Baptist's vehement protest. He is not the Messiah! Nor is he Elijah - traditionally, expected to precede the Messiah nor a prophet like Moses. (see Deuteronomy 18:15 & 18).

He is only a voice, foretold by Isaiah (Ch. 63) and those who receive baptism have taken heed of the warning and repented.

He is no more than a slave whose task it is to untie his master's sandal; and he feels unworthy even for that. This is a pointed reference to the fact that competing with the Church, there was a group of the Baptist’s followers. (see Acts 19:1-4). The Gospel makes the explicit point that the Baptist himself acknowledged Jesus’ seniority. Whilst a Chaplain at Halton Hospital, I met a surgeon from Syria who told me that he was a member of the same group to-day! So they are (just) older than the Church!

What matters to us is that the sense of joy, which is the keynote of today's liturgy, should be based on a conviction that, in the words of the Baptist, there stands among us, perhaps unknown to us, the one who will finally come in glory. Our hope is not all in the future. The work of our salvation has already begun.