

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year C

3rd Sunday of Advent

First reading: (Zephaniah 3.14-18)

Rejoice, Daughter of Jerusalem!

Zephaniah prophesies that Jerusalem, the Holy City, sacked by the Babylonians, will be restored. It will be a day of overwhelming joy, when the Lord will truly be king in Jerusalem.

After the Exile in Babylon, the Jews returned to Jerusalem, but they were continually dominated by one set of foreign rulers after another, tossed from one to another as the plaything of their powerful neighbours. They longed more and more to be free, to have God as their only ruler.

When Jesus came, the kingship of God dominated his whole horizon, but they failed to recognize the kingship of God in his proclamation and his way of life. He was not the conquering hero they expected, and the citizens he gathered into his kingdom were the hungry, the poor, the persecuted, the disadvantaged, the alienated, the lost, the despised, the crippled and the sick. It was to these that he brought joy and rejoicing 'as on a day of festival'. If they failed to see God at work in his life, it was because they were looking for the wrong sort of God. If we want to share Christ's joy at Christmas, we must focus on the right kind of Kingship of God.

Question:

Am I ready to rejoice at the coming of the Lord Jesus into our midst?

Second reading: (Philippians 4.4-7)

Be joyful in the Lord!

The encouragement that begins this reading, 'Be joyful!', gave the third Sunday of Advent, halfway through the preparation for Christmas, its traditional name of Gaudete Sunday.

However, it is all very well for Paul to tell us not to worry but to place all our desires before God. In the same vein, the Letter of James tells us that prayer must be made with faith, without a trace of doubt. Nevertheless, are our prayers always answered? How can they be, if you pray for rain while I pray for sunshine?

The true prayer of petition is Jesus' own prayer, an embrace of the Father in loving confidence that God is just that, our loving Father. We can think we know what will make us happy, but the only true receipt for happiness is to leave it to God, in the knowledge that our human perception is short sighted and incomplete. Any further prayer must be provisional. It is almost a game: I think I know what will make me happy, but on another level I know that I don't know, that only God knows best. All I can do is to cast my worries onto the Lord and leave the rest to him.

Question:

Should I pray for any specific thing, or leave it all to God?

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Gospel:

(Luke 3.10-18)

John the Baptist's Counsels

In this second of the two Sunday gospels about John the Baptist, we first hear details about how to prepare for the coming of the Messiah. Luke is always aware of the dangers of wealth and money, so he concentrates on avoiding its misuse. First, he teaches equal sharing with the needy, no hoarding but generosity. Then he turns to financial exploitation; tax collectors had to pay for the right to collect taxes, and would be tempted to extort a nice margin to cover their own needs. In the same way, soldiers could be tempted to abuse their power of intimidation by bullying those they were meant to protect.

The second half of John's task is to point away from himself towards Jesus, who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Luke's gospel and the Acts of the Apostles are full of the Holy Spirit. Luke must have been vividly aware of the working of the Spirit in the Church, in its ministers of all kinds and in the life of the Christian communities. He warns also of the fierce fire that will purge away impurities; for John the Messiah is a stern figure who will burn away the rubbish in human hearts to make room for the Spirit.

Question:

How would John the Baptist tell me to clean up my life?
