

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year A

Second Sunday of Advent

First reading:

(Isaiah 11.1-10)

A Shoot from the Stock of Jesse

From this reading the seven gifts of the Spirit are, rather artificially, taken. Seven is the perfect number, so this is intended to signify that the promised ruler will have all possible gifts of what we more generally call wisdom and understanding. He will be a ruler before whom one can stand in the secure knowledge that his judgment will be deeply fair and satisfying. The 'fear of the Lord' ensures that they will be in accordance with the divinely ordered bases of creation.

Such is the Ruler whom we await at Christmas. It was surely these qualities that made Jesus such an attractive and charismatic figure, so that he could, as a wholly unknown stranger, pass those fishermen, and they would drop everything and respond to his call, 'Follow me'. Confrontation with his personality was shock enough and inspiring enough to cure sickness. His simple word gave assurance of forgiveness of sin. His command reduced the elements of nature to serenity.

In the second half of the reading, we see the consequences, a return to the peace of the Garden of Eden. No more hostility, no more jealousy. Nature, even human nature, will not be red in tooth and claw.

Question:

To you, what is the most attractive feature of the human Jesus?

Second reading:

(Romans 15.4-9)

The Generosity of Christ

Paul is here summing up his message to the Romans, a fragmented community of several house-churches, some drawn from Judaism, some from the gentiles.

He has described and analysed Christ's work of salvation, the generosity of Christ in giving himself up for us, to win us back to the Father. Then he calls upon his hearers to imitate Christ's generosity.

He speaks first to the Christians sprung, like himself, from Judaism, reminding them of the promises of scripture, the heritage of Judaism, which were to inspire them with hope, for God's promises are never failing and sure. Then he reminds them with a string of quotations (only the first of which is given, at the end of this reading) that God's promises were intended for the gentiles too, so that they too should praise God's name.

Why are we given this reading in Advent? Because the perfect generosity of Jesus Christ in taking on this work of our salvation must be the model for our own generosity, both to those who are our natural friends and to those who are not, and because it must be the basis of our hope. However neglectful and ungrateful we are, Christ's work cannot have been in vain.

Question:

In what way can I be more generous to prepare for Christmas, especially to those who are not my natural friends?

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Gospel:

(Matthew 3.1-12)

John the Baptist's Call to Repentance

'Repentance' is an unattractive idea. It conjures up morose brooding over past sins and failures, a negative idea. This is not what John the Baptist proclaimed. His message was wholly positive. In both Hebrew and Greek, the concept is a change of behaviour, a change of direction. John is calling on them to change their ways, to change their scale of values, their whole direction of life.

To reinforce his message he wears the clothes worn by Elijah, the prophet who was to return to announce the final coming of the Lord. He proclaims his message in the desert, that apocalyptic landscape of the arid and bare Jordan Valley, below sea level, where merchants would be crossing the Jordan on the road to the east. So he makes a deliberate claim to be this final prophet and to be preparing a way for the Lord.

We see Jesus as the Messiah, the loving Saviour, but John was not yet proclaiming Jesus. He was proclaiming the threatening and imminent arrival of the sovereignty of God, when rotten trees would be cut down and evil swept away to be burnt in unquenchable fire.

If we are to be open to the arrival of the Kingship of God, we may need to look to our scale of values. Am I the only person who matters to me?

Question:

Is my scale of values compatible with the Kingship of God? How far do they coincide?
