

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year A

Third Sunday of Advent

First reading:

(Isaiah 35.1-6, 10)

'The Eyes of the Blind shall be Opened.'

Like all the first readings in Advent, this passage is from Isaiah, rejoicing in the coming deliverance.

Most of the Book of Isaiah was written in a dark period of Israel's history, under the threat or the reality of defeat, devastation and deportation. The promises of a deliverer became all the more important and life sustaining. The prophet (or prophets, for the Book of Isaiah can hardly be the work of a single person) never wavered in his confidence that deliverance was sure.

The prophecies prepare for the coming of the Lord, but it is the coming of the Lord God. On the one hand, there is not the clarity that would appear once Jesus had actually come: the prophecies do not make clear in what way or what form God would come to the rescue of his people. Would the promised Redeemer be God himself or a messenger or a herald of the end? At all events, God would be at work.

On the other hand, when Jesus came it was not immediately clear whether he was God, or whether God was at work in Jesus or whether Jesus was the final prophet. This became clear only on reflection in the light of the Spirit: 'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.'

Question:

Is the message of this reading encouraging or threatening?

Second reading:

(Philippians 4.4-7)

Waiting for the Lord

The Letter of James is rarely read on a Sunday, indeed only once in this year. Yet it is full of comforting, homely images, like the farmer waiting patiently for the autumn and spring rains, or - less comforting - the judge waiting at the gates.

Whether it was written by James, who was the leader of the Christian community at Jerusalem, is harder to determine. It may be an assemblage of the oral wisdom teaching of this important Christian leader, written up by a disciple.

In any case, the Letter was written at a time when the eschatological fever of expectation had begun to wane, when Christians no longer felt that they were in the final generation of world history, and were prepared to settle down and wait for the coming of the Lord.

Indeed, in contrast to the Paul's stress on the imminence of the Second Coming, for James the delay of the Second Coming is an incitement to patience. It will certainly happen, but there is plenty of opportunity beforehand for tolerance, both towards the annoying and tiresome people within the community and towards those persecuting the community from outside.

Question:

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

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Gospel:

(Matthew 11.2-11)

Miracles of the Messiah

John the Baptist was expecting a Messiah of judgment who would cut down the rotten tree and burn the useless chaff. When, in prison, he hears that Jesus is not doing this, he is puzzled and sends messengers to ask if Jesus is really the Messiah. Jesus sends back the message that he is fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah - the passage we heard in the first reading.

Jesus' concept of the task of the Messiah was healing, not punishment. He goes and seeks out those who need healing, both physical and moral. He does not wait for sinners to repent before gathering them in; he makes the first advance. Then he turns to praising the Baptist.

It is a fascinating speculation whether Jesus was himself once a disciple of John the Baptist. After all, John says he did not recognize Jesus until he saw the Spirit coming down on him. He also says that Jesus, who came after him, has passed before him. This is a typical position of a rabbi, leading his disciples, and suggests that John had been Jesus' rabbi, then became his disciple. Jesus was fully man, and even he needed to learn as all human beings do.

Question:

What healing can I do to spread the Kingship of God?
