

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year B

Second Sunday of Advent

First reading:

(Isaiah 40.1-5, 9-11)

'Console my People, Console them'

The reading from Isaiah for today is the joyful song that opens the second part of Isaiah.

After the 70 years of the Exile, Israel is looking forward to the return to Jerusalem, aware that they are soon to be released from their captivity. They have 'served their sentence' in Babylon and their sin has been forgiven. The Lord will lead them in joy across the great desert as he led them across the desert at the Exodus and will manifest his glory again.

For Christians, the excitement is that John the Baptist picks up this message as he prepares the people for the coming of Christ. The coming of the Lord to Jerusalem was never wholly fulfilled, and we can see that the great fulfilment of this passage is in the coming of Christ to his own. He came to Jerusalem, yes, but has the divine glory been yet manifested? He brought the beginning of the Kingship of God, but it is for us Christians to show the glory and the love and the generosity of God to a world that has not yet seen the splendour of his coming. This is the daunting responsibility of those who bear the name of 'Christian', who see in Jesus the manifestation of God's reign.

Question:

Has it any sense to say that the coming of Christ changed the world?

Second reading:

(2 Peter 3.8-14)

The Lord Comes in the Night

The Second Letter of Peter, probably the last of all the writings of the New Testament, here sets out to comfort Christians who were disappointed that the 'Big Bang' at the end of the world had not yet happened.

The first generations of Christians had expected the world to come rapidly to an end - and yet it still goes on. In the first generation of Christians, much of Paul's moral teaching is shaped by the idea that the Second Coming will occur very soon.

In the second generation, the author of this letter does not have such immediacy. He says that our task is to live holy lives in peace, and to wait in patience. The Second Coming is still imminent in the sense that we must live our lives in view of it, and we have no time to lose. But it will not occur tomorrow!

From this point of view, the annual cycle of Church feasts and festivals, even of Christmas, is a reminder that God is in total control of his universe. For us the seasons roll round, but, for God, time is meaningless.

Question:

Has the final coming of Christ any relevance for Christians today?

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Gospel:

(Mark 1.1-8)

A Baptism for Conversion

Each Advent has two John the Baptist Sundays, the first when we see John preparing a community for the Messiah, the second when he points out Jesus as the Lamb of God. Today is the first of these.

John chose a point where the busy road from Jerusalem to the east crossed the Jordan River. There he buttonholed all the busy financiers, merchants and other travellers and tourists, warning them to change their ways - and to change them now, before it was too late. 'I am too busy', no doubt they said, 'I have other things to worry about; I have a wife and family to feed.'

John was forming a community of repentance, but not so much a community that wept 'Boohoo!' about its sins, as a community of people determined to set the scale of values right. He meant them to stop going in one direction, to turn round and go in a different direction.

Do we give ourselves a moment of pause to ask whether we have our priorities right? Where on our list of priorities does the entry of Christ into our lives come? John said rotten trees were going to be cut down, useless straw to be burnt. Do I need to feel the axe at my feet?

Question:

What would happen if I turned my life round?
