

3rd Sunday of Advent: Year B

Introduction

“We anticipate God not with fear and trembling but with rejoicing.” ~ **Balthasar, *Light of the World*, 152**

First Reading

Isaiah 61:1–2a, 10–11

61 The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
²to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;

¹⁰I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

¹¹For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.

“In the first reading the prophet announces his coming and explains it: the coming of the Lord’s messenger will mean healing and liberation to all who are poor, brokenhearted, imprisoned, and captive. This “year of the Lord’s favour” applies to all of us, for all of us are imprisoned by ourselves and captivated by ourselves; far from being uninjured, all of us are so fractured and poverty-stricken that we cannot heal ourselves. Yet it is not by means of a strange miracle outside us that God will accomplish healing, rather, God works from within us, just as an organism heals from the inside out. Since God has implanted his Holy Spirit in our hearts, His Spirit can transform us from the inside: “as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up” (v.11). The God who created us is not distant or estranged from our innermost person, rather, he holds the key to our most hidden depths; only later do we perhaps notice that he has been at work in us for some time.” ~ **Balthasar, *Light of the World*, 152-3**

3rd Sunday of Advent: Year B

Isaiah's Prophecy of the Messiah

1. The Spirit: “the Spirit of the LORD is upon me”
2. **The Messiah**: “the Lord has anointed (*mashach*) me” — from which we get the Hebrew noun *mashiach*, that just means anointed one. That exact word gets translated into Greek as *christos* or Christ. So there's a parallelism there between the *mashach* of Isaiah 61, the Messiah, the one was anointed, and the *christos* that John the Baptist mentions in the Gospel.
3. **Good News**: “to bring good news (*Gk euangelisasthai*) to the poor” — The “good news”, as we read in last week's Gospel, is rooted in Isaiah's prophecy of God's coming. This is Advent. Preparing for the good news of the coming of God.
4. Bridegroom: “he has clothed me... as a bridegroom decks himself”

“I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God” (v.10). Our response to God's coming should be joy. This is Gaudete Sunday! *Gaudete* is the Latin for rejoice. So today is Rejoice Sunday.

Responsorial Psalm: Luke 1:46–50, 53–54

⁴⁶And Mary said,
“My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,

Here Mary rejoices in being chosen to be the mother of the Messiah. Since we are in the 2nd part of Advent, the focus is shifting toward the actual birth of Jesus himself.

⁴⁸for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
⁵⁰His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,

3rd Sunday of Advent: Year B

Second Reading: 1 Thessalonians 5:16–24

2nd Reading always takes my breath away. From the 1st reading we have in Christianity. And here is Paul's summary statement from this massively important Christian text. What does he tell us? Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances, give thanks. For Paul, the coming of Jesus changed everything! And this is Christianity. Jesus turned everything upside down, so that the usual way of thinking can no longer happen. Let's look at the 3 recommendations:

16 Rejoice always

Here we see the theme of joy again for Gaudete Sunday.

Wouldn't this attitude be insane to live out!? Rejoice your mother just died... Paul doesn't mean we should be on an emotional high at all times... Paul is suggesting that the resurrection of Jesus signals that a victory of universal significance has been won, that no negatively the world could throw at us could every undo it or render it null. As Paul said in Romans, neither life nor death can separate us from the love of Christ. There is always cause for joy as a result. The saints lived this... an abiding peace even through the worst of life ~ Bishop Barron

17 pray without ceasing,

How can one even do this!? Even a full-time monk can't pray every minute... so how can we expect to? Think of the difference Christ has made. By His Incarnation, He has made it possible for all people to participate in the relationship He has with His Father... from all eternity, the Son lives in intimate love with the Father and they give rise to the Holy Spirit... and then by becoming human, he takes on our fallen humanity then gives us access to the same relationship He has had from all eternity. What is prayer? Our becoming conscious in an explicit way of something taking place at all times. ~ Bishop Barron

18 give thanks in all circumstances;

How can we do this? By realizing that Jesus has transformed all things into means of sanctification. We who participate in Christ see the world differently as a place where grace is always and everywhere on offer.

for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. ¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not despise the words of prophets, ²¹ but test everything; hold fast to what is good; ²² abstain from every form of evil.

²³ May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Here is the 2nd Advent theme: the *parousia* in Greek or the *adventus* in Latin — being ready for the advent of Christ. So the Church is always keeping before us not just the first coming, but the second

3rd Sunday of Advent: Year B

coming of Christ at the end of time. So it is like a dual theme that runs throughout the readings for the Advent season.

24 The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

“Because we belong to Christ, joy should outweigh everything else in us; because we cannot heal and construct ourselves, we have to pray and thank and make room for the Spirit at work in us... we must ensure actively, not passively, that the Spirit has opportunity to go to work in us.” ~ **Balthasar, *Light of the World*, 153**

In the second reading St. Paul pairs the call to “rejoice always” with the call to “pray without ceasing.” A true understanding of Christian prayer is the doorway into a true understanding of Christian joy. Pope Benedict XVI reminded us: “The Fathers of the Church say that prayer, properly understood, is nothing other than *becoming a longing for God*.” As Saint Augustine put it, “Desire is your prayer; and if your desire is without ceasing, your prayer will also be without ceasing.” Christian joy comes to us as we learn to let go of all of our God-substitutes (our idols) and direct our deep desire for love and happiness toward the one who alone can fulfill it: “in my God is the joy of my soul” (first reading); “My soul rejoices in my God” (responsorial psalm). This is what it means to be made “perfectly holy” and blameless in “spirit, soul, and body”: to desire nothing but “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (second reading). At his coming, he will be clothed “like a bridegroom” and we will be clothed “like a bride” and we will “rejoice heartily in the Lord” (first reading). ~ Christopher West, "Word Made Flesh: A Companion to the Sunday Readings"

3rd Sunday of Advent: Year B

Gospel: John 1:6–8, 19–28

Introduction

Although Year B is dedicated to the Gospel of Mark, the Church supplements some events that are missing in Mark's Gospel with passages from other Gospels, and in this case with John's Gospel.

It's interesting to note that John the Baptist gets at least 2 Sundays in Advent every year that are focused on his life and on his mission.

⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

A constant theme in John's Gospel is that Jesus is the light of the world.

“witness” = *martureó*, we get the word martyr from that. So John is going to be in a real sense the first Christian martyr, in so far as he's going to die for bearing witness to Christ, the Messiah.

Why does John the Evangelist clarify this? Because the Baptist was an extremely popular Jewish figure and prophet. If you read, for example, the writings of Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, Josephus mentions John the Baptist and he mentions Jesus, but he gives a lot more attention to John the Baptist, creating the impression, and some scholars have suggested this, that in some ways John was even more popular and widely known than Jesus was. He was certainly a less controversial figure in the sense that he was widely accepted by his Jewish contemporaries as someone who was sent from God, who had a message from God. So John was extremely popular, so St. John the evangelist here is having to make clear to us that John himself is not the Messiah, but rather just his precursor, just his forerunner, because some Jews actually were wondering if John was in fact the Messiah. ~ **Dr. Brant Pitre**

¹⁹ This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” ²⁰ He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, “I am not the Messiah.”

“the Messiah”: *christos*. It just means anointed one. It is a title, not a name. So although we tend to use the word Christ as if it were Jesus' last name, it's not how it would've been utilized in the first century. So what the Baptist is literally saying here is I am not the anointed one. So strike one, he's not the king of Israel that everyone's been waiting for, which some people probably thought.

²¹ And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.”

3rd Sunday of Advent: Year B

“Elijah”: What's that about? Well if you look back at the book of Malachi 3-4, there's this prophecy that says that God is going to send Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord. So the Jews, based on that prophecy from Malachi, had developed the expectation that before the Messiah would come at the time of salvation, Elijah would have to come first. So when John the Baptist appears on the scene and he is clearly a prophet speaking for God, and he even dresses and acts like Elijah — he lives out in the wilderness and wears a garment made out of camel's hair like Elijah had dressed — some people say he must be Elijah. So they ask him, “are you Elijah?” And he says, “No, I'm not.”

“[I]n another place his disciples asked our Lord about the coming of Elijah, he answered, “... John is Elijah” (Matt 11:14).” John, when he was asked, said, “I am not.”... If we carefully examine truth himself, what sounded contradictory is found to be not contradictory. The angel said to Zechariah, of the promised birth of John, “that he will come in the spirit and power of Elijah” (Luke 1:17). This is said because just as Elijah is the forerunner of the Lord's second coming, so was John the forerunner of his first; as Elijah will come as the forerunner of the Lord, so was John the forerunner of the Redeemer. John, then, was Elijah in spirit; he was not Elijah in person.” ~ **St. Gregory the Great, Forty Gospel Homilies 4; trans. in J. Elowsky, 2006, p. 61**

“In other words, if you go back to the Old Testament you will remember, Elijah doesn't die, he ascends into heaven on the chariot of fire in the book of Kings. So many Jews thought that when the Messiah would come, Elijah would himself in person come down from heaven in order to be the predecessor of the Messiah, and some Jews in fact thought that's who John the Baptist was, that he was Elijah come back down from heaven in person. So when they ask him are you Elijah in person, John is saying no, I'm not Elijah, I haven't come back down from heaven. What he is though is the forerunner of the Messiah. He is the one who goes before the Lord as the angel Gabriel said in the spirit and power of Elijah. So John the Baptist is an Elijah type figure, but he is not Elijah reincarnated, he is not Elijah returned from heaven, and the ancient Church Fathers, like St. Gregory here, believed that the actual Elijah, Elijah in person, would precede Jesus at his second coming. You can actually see this in the book of Revelation 11. Although that is a debated text, these two figures that appear seem to be Elijah and Moses returning in some way, shape or form. In any case, that is a debated point. What is not debated here though is that John the Baptist is not Elijah reincarnate, he is a different person than Elijah, but he is the forerunner of the Messiah, and so both things are true. Yes, like Jesus says, he is the forerunner of the Messiah, he is the new Elijah who is to come, but no, he's not Elijah come down from heaven. So we see there that both those truths come together to point us to the fact, once again, that John is the man sent from God who is come into the world to bear witness to light of the world who has come in Jesus Christ.” ~ Dr. Brant Pitre

“Are you the prophet?” He answered, “No.”

“The prophet”: Now notice this. They don't just say “are you a prophet?” Everyone recognized that. What they say is “are you the prophet?” They use the definite article, *ho prophetēs* in Greek, and so the prophet in a first century Jewish context wasn't just anybody, it was a reference to Deuteronomy 18 and the prophecy of the prophet like Moses. Before the Israelites went into the promised land, Moses in the book of Deuteronomy says to them, “The Lord your God will raise up

3rd Sunday of Advent: Year B

for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him.” So the expectation developed that one day there would be this prophet like Moses who would come, and sometimes he was even associated with the Messiah himself. The Messiah was seen as the new Moses — I get into this in my book *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist*, where we look at Jesus as the new Moses. So effectively what the Levites and Priests are asking John the Baptist here is are you the new Moses? Are you the Prophet like Moses? Then again, strike three, “no, I’m not the new Moses.”

22 Then they said to him, “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” 23 He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ ” as the prophet Isaiah said.

In other words, I am the one who was spoken of by Isaiah in Isaiah 40. Now we looked at this prophecy in detail last week for the Second Sunday of Advent, and we looked at how Isaiah had prophesied a new Exodus and this messenger who would come and would act as a herald to proclaim that God himself was coming in order to save his people, to proclaim the coming of the new Exodus. So this a very important text because in the Gospel of Mark, Mark lets you know that John the Baptist was the one that Isaiah had spoken of. But in John's Gospel, John the Baptist himself identifies himself as the figure from Isaiah chapter 40, the forerunner of God, the Herald of God, the prophet of the new Exodus. So that's how John the Baptist identifies himself in this passage. ~ Dr. Brant Pitre

“The closer one comes to God for the purpose of testifying to him, the more clearly one sees the distance between God and creature. The more one vacates space within himself for God, the more he becomes a simple instrument of God, a “voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’” (v.23). ~ Balthasar, *Light of the World*, 154

24 Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. 25 They asked him, “Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” 26 John answered them, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, 27 the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” 28 This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.