

Third Sunday of Advent Year B

Advent is both the end and the beginning of the Christian year. It begins by pointing us to the end of all things in the fulfilment of God's mission of love, and then leads us gently through some key moments and key people in the story of that mission of love, especially in relation to the coming of Jesus

A long tradition gives pride of place, on one of the Sundays of Advent, to the ministry of John the Baptist. In our current three-year lectionary it is this Sunday, the Third in Advent, that focuses our thought on him.

Old Testament

Isa 61: 1-4, 8-11

This is one of the many much-loved passages in the book we know as Isaiah. We can sit back and listen, and bask in the glorious language, the comforting and reassuring sentiments being expressed – it is truly a gem among millions in the scriptures.

Yet think a moment. If the prophet makes a claim that “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me”, and the influence of this Spirit is causing him and empowering him to “bring good news”, does not this tell us about the nature of the Spirit as good-news-bringer, as binder-up of the broken-hearted, etc., just as surely as it tells about the calling and mission of the prophet? Surely these two – the character and mission of the one in whose name the prophet acts, and the work of the prophet himself, cannot be at variance with one another. In short, this wonderful text tells us something of the true nature of God. And whenever a person or a group claims to be speaking or acting in the name of God and their words and actions lead in precisely the opposite direction – towards further oppression, earlier recourse to prison sentences, more refugees consigned to camps for indefinite periods, harsher laws – surely it is the time to take note of the fundamental inconsistency between their words and actions and the message of Isaiah 61. Talk of “robes of righteousness” in verse 10 must be weighed against the words of compassion and justice in verses 1-4 and 8.

Ps 126

Here the words of the psalmist capture perfectly the sense of astonished relief when a time of pain and exile comes to an end. In verse 6 we have words that will surely find an echo among folk who, at this moment of history, are sowing seed in tears, as they try to rebuild lives and hopes shattered by the “Credit Crunch”

Or

Luke 1:46-55 The Magnificat

Ah yes! The Credit Crunch, the toppling of the mighty from their thrones, the rich going away empty. The rich are sent away empty, the hungry are filled.

In our response to the Credit Crunch, as voters, as customers, as investors, can we meaningfully assess our decision-making in relation to the plight of the hungry, those who may be less able to respond to unemployment and hard times. This wonderful poem, like the poem in Isaiah 61, expresses the true character of God, God's values, concerns, intentions and hopes for all his people regardless of race or faith. As we share in Mary's song, we are not simply resting on the truth about God; we are conforming ourselves to that truth. One of the New Testament writers spoke enigmatically about "doing the truth". Here is our guidepost.

Epistle 1 Th 5: 16-24

The glorious upbeat tone of this letter continues to the very end. All that follows this extract is a group of warm, affectionate greetings, together with a command (!) that the letter be read to everyone in the Thessalonian fellowship.

But there is food for thought here too. What does Paul mean by "rejoice always"? or "pray without ceasing"?

Rejoicing, for most of us, depends on our mood. It is often prompted by some good news we've just heard – a niece has just announced her engagement, a grandchild has been born, an exam passed, a new job secured. Paul is digging deeper. What Christians have in common is that the amazing news of God's love in Christ has been shared with us and received by us, and now it is the most important element in our whole being. That surely surpasses all these other grounds for rejoicing, and it remains good news for us every day.

The idea of unceasing prayer suggests an individual or a community on its knees with its eyes shut, inattentive to the concerns and needs of the real world. Nothing could be further from Paul's intention here. Unceasing prayer is rather about us conducting a perpetual conversation with God (whose love for us and for all people is the ground of all our rejoicing) even as we are immersed in the concerns and activities of the world, which is God's world and for which Jesus died.

So, the ground of our joy is the love of God in Christ. The ground of our action and service is that we are in constant conversation with God. This will enable us to test everything – bring everything to a wise judgement, even if it is only a provisional judgement to allow us to reach a decision, act upon it and move on.

But Paul goes on to remind us that the aim, the goal, the meaning of life is to be found not simply in God-directed action by us. There is a destiny, a purpose, which can be attained and fulfilled only as God brings us to himself in the final fulfilment of all things.

Gospel John 1: 6-8, 19-28

As with many other aspects of the story of Jesus, the fourth evangelist has a particular slant on the ministry of his herald – John the Baptist. John figures very early in this gospel, as part of the prologue (1:1-18). The theme of the evangelist’s testimony about his namesake is that the mission of John the Baptist was not to draw attention to himself but to point to the one who comes after me.

Questions of identity loom large in the conversation between John and those who were sent out to quiz him. Who are you? In a rather strange sentence (verse 20) we have John reported as confessing, and not denying, a negative “I am not the Messiah”. These two words – confess and deny – seem rather out-of-place in such a conversation, but these are the words used later to describe the response of the man born blind (9:22, and see also 12:42) and the response of Peter to the challenging questions in the courtyard outside the High Priest’s house (18:27). In these contexts the theme is interrogation under charge. For the blind man the threat is one of expulsion from the synagogue – a dramatic loss of identity in the community. For Peter, the threat is that he might find himself at his Master’s side on a cross.

John’s gospel is all about the decision about Jesus and the decision for Jesus. The consequences that hang upon such a decision – either way – are indeed momentous. The decision confronts the characters in the gospel story, as set out by the fourth evangelist, from all angles – from religious authority, from the powers that be, and from within every person. So these two words, indicating as they do the momentous character of such a decision, are flagged up right at the very beginning of the gospel. The story of John is no mere prelude to the story of Jesus; its themes resound throughout the gospel. The fourth evangelist means business!