

2nd Sunday of Advent, Cycle A

Let us pray:

Loving God, help us to prepare for your Kingdom
of power and might, of love and mercy.

Show us where the path needs to be straightened.
Smooth out any rough spots.

Fill us with your Holy Spirit:
Set our hearts on fire with your transforming love.

Then send us out to warm the earth. Come, Lord Jesus, come!

Justice shall flourish in his time and fullness of peace forever.

The Lord will rescue the poor when he cries out,
and the afflicted when he has no one to help him.
He shall have pity for the lowly and the poor;
The lives of the poor he shall save.
May his name be blessed forever.

Justice shall flourish in his time, and fullness of peace forever.

1st Reading – Isaiah 2: 1-5

Remember, this section is from ‘First Isaiah’ – that part of Isaiah that was written by an 8th century prophet when Assyria was attacking Israel (#40-55 are probably written during the 6th century and the Babylonian exile). This was a world in crisis. King Ahaz had tried to rely on political alliances that he had made with Syria against the northern kingdom of Israel; eventually war and destruction made Judah, the southern kingdom, a vassal of Assyria. Ahaz failed as leader and king to protect his people. Isaiah hoped that the future king, Hezekiah, would prove to be a ‘new shoot’ – a king that would have the Spirit of the Lord upon him. *Hezekiah* did not turn out to be equal to these hopes. But the hopes gave way to a vision that still speaks to us today.

(Celebration, Dec. 1998)

This powerful poetry continues to give a vision of God’s plan that goes beyond the immediate disasters of life.

How does it speak to you?

Why would the church use this reading during Advent time?

What *wolves or lions* within yourself or your life need to learn to lie down and ‘be neighbors’ with the *lambs and calves* of your life?

2nd Reading -- Romans (15:4-9):

In the first two verses of this chapter Paul states:

“We who are strong ought to put up with the failures of the weak and not to please ourselves; let each of us please our neighbor for the good, for the building up” of the community.

How do these words help to state clearly what Paul is saying here?

Paul is really furthering the vision of Isaiah here by encouraging us to see how the ‘peaceable kingdom’ has begun in Jesus, the One who welcomed – even sought out – sinners, the afflicted, the lost. We must continue Jesus’ example.

No one is excluded from God’s mercy. (Celebration, Dec. 2004)

From *The Holy Longing* by Ronald Rolheiser:

What Jesus wants from us is not admiration, but *imitation* . . .

Undergoing Jesus must be the center of any Christian spirituality . . .

Jesus is the vine, the blood, the pulse, and the heart . . .

everything else is merely a branch . . .

The Word was made flesh and it dwells among us. (74-75)

God takes on flesh so that every home becomes a church,

every child becomes the Christ-child,

and all food and drink become a sacrament (78).

The word did not just become flesh and dwell among us . . .

it continues to dwell among us.

God still has physical skin . . .

can still be seen, touched, smelled, heard, and tasted –

It is the core of Christian spirituality . . . (80)

We are born into a community (111-114) . . .

A diverse and motley collection of persons . . .

To be church is not to be with others with whom we are . . .

compatible. Rather it is to stand,

shoulder to shoulder and hand in hand,

precisely with people who are very different

from ourselves and, with them, hear a common word,

say a common creed, share a common bread,

and offer a mutual forgiveness so as, in that way,

to bridge our differences and become a common heart. (115)

Sin, pettiness and betrayal are always found alongside

grace, sanctity, and fidelity.

The church is always God hung between two thieves. (127-128)

We, too, need a heart with many rooms. (131).

Heaven . . . is the communal embrace of billions of persons of every temperament, race, background, and ideology imaginable. (139)

The Gospel -- Matthew (3: 1-12):

John cries out: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” (Jesus began His ministry with the very same words in Mt.3: 17.) How do the first two readings prepare us for these words? How is this an Advent message?

John wants us to know that God’s justice is filled with mercy – mercy toward those in need, those who are lost, those who are afflicted. God’s mercy and justice demand an accounting – and a repenting. We must confront failure and darkness and cruelty – *anything that ruins our life in relationship with one another*. Then we will know our need for God. As Mother Teresa often said, even God cannot fill what is already full. We need to know our emptiness so we can be filled with God’s life. *Now is the time*.

(Exploring the Sunday Readings & Celebration, Dec. 2004)

What images of desert and mountains and valleys – of Spirit and fire – of axe and root – of good fruit and wheat and chaff – speak most to you?

Interesting details about John:

**His ‘dress’ of camel’s hair and leather belt
is the ‘dress’ of a prophet.**

(See 2 Kings 1:8 & Zechariah 13:4 – Living Liturgy, A, 2002)

His food is a sign of the Kingdom:

**honey is a symbol of sweetness and plenty
while locust brings an image of judgment –**

Remember God’s judgment against Pharaoh’s treatment of his Hebrew slaves?

From Reginald Fuller, “Scripture in Depth”, <http://liturgy.slu.edu>:

The incarnation is about *the whole* “Christ-event” – the total coming of the Son of God in the flesh, which includes not only Jesus’ nativity, but also his whole ministry, his life, death, resurrection and ascension. In fact, most of the New Testament, aside from the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke, can proclaim the Christ-event without speaking of the birth at all.

***Waiting calmly* – this can be an Advent gift that God wishes to give us. If we take the time to look around, be aware while waiting in traffic or lines or in the darkness of an early morning – we can begin to be *grateful* for so many things and persons around us – even the barren trees which now help us see through to the heavens. How wise they are to shed their leaves before the cold and snow! As our hearts swell with thanksgiving, we also realize that we have nothing to deserve all the goodness that surrounds our lives. Our own *shocking smallness* can also be a great gift. “I am not the center of the universe. I do not have to control everything around me. I can rest in God’s arms and then reach out to help others as best I can. God does not erase trouble; God loves us within it. *God labors to give each creature the gift of a lifetime*. (John Foley, S.J. “Spirituality of the Readings,” <http://liturgy.slu.edu>)**

It is also important to remember when we read about repenting and judgment that we remember that Scripture is meant, first of all, to call ourselves to conversion. We may be tempted, though, to think it is all right to point the finger at others and even practice retribution ourselves. But it is fundamental to recall that God is the one who does the judging and God alone does the cutting. *Final judgment is God's job; ours is repentance.*

(*Exploring the Sunday Readings, Dec. 9, 2007*)

How can we let this gospel move our hearts this Advent?

Ideas that might help us respond to this week's readings:

*During the remainder of Advent, plan a retreat to your own *desert*. Clear your heart and mind (for 5, 10, or 15 minutes) with silent reflection each day. Become fully 'awake' and 'aware' of all that is around you and in you. Rest in this awareness; trust that God is there, too.

*Identify areas of friction or tension in your family, parish, or within yourself. Pray for guidance about what you can do to bring harmony, tolerance, and welcome. (from *Quest*, Fall 2004)

On the kind of 'waiting' that Jesus wants from us:

In a sense, *presence* could be compared to waiting. Jesus used the analogy of waiting in some of his parables. This is not the usual bored or restless kind of waiting that is a denial of the present . . . It is not a waiting in which your attention is focused on some point in the future and the present is perceived as an undesirable obstacle that prevents you from having what you want. There is a qualitatively different kind of waiting, one that requires your *total alertness*. Something could happen at any moment, and if you are not absolutely awake, absolutely still, you will miss it. This is the kind of waiting Jesus talks about. In that state, *all your attention is in the Now*. There is no tension in it, no fear, just alert presence. You are present with your whole being, with every cell of your body . . .

"Be like a servant waiting for the return of the master," says Jesus. The servant does not know at what hour the master is going to come. So he stays awake, alert, poised, still, lest he miss the master's arrival" . . .

Or –

Like being aware of beauty – a sunrise, a mountain, fall leaves, a bird and its song, a field of wild flowers:

"To be aware of such things, the mind needs to be still" – alert – open to seeing and hearing . . .

"Put down for a moment your personal baggage of problems, of past and future otherwise you will see, but not see, hear but not hear" . . .

(From *The Power of Now* by Eckhart Tolle, p. 78-80)

Let us pray:

O Lord, giver of life.

Open our hearts to experience your passionate love for us all.

Shine the light of Your Kingdom into our darkness,

burning away the chaff that burdens us needlessly.

When we face the challenge of self-giving, of risking:

Come, Lord Jesus. Help us now to show Your love.

When we face a world that is bleak with sadness and wrong:

Come, Lord Jesus. Help us now to know Your peace.

When we face harshness and the abuse of power:

Come, Lord Jesus. Help us now to know Your wisdom.

When we face problems and worry,

not believing in our own giftedness and Your grace:

Come, Lord Jesus. Help us now to trust Your truth.

When we see someone in need of

thoughtfulness, encouragement or hope:

Come, Lord Jesus. Help us now to give Your love. Amen.