

Readings for the Third Sunday of Advent

17th December 2023

First Reading: Isaiah 61:1-4,8-11

The servant of the LORD said:

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 broken-hearted,

to proclaim liberty to the captives,

and release to the prisoners;

to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour,

and the day of vengeance of our God;

to comfort all who mourn;

to provide for those who mourn in Zion –

to give them a garland instead of ashes,

the oil of gladness instead of mourning,

the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

They will be called oaks of righteousness,

the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.

They shall build up the ancient ruins,

they shall raise up the former devastations;

they shall repair the ruined cities,

the devastations of many generations.

For I the LORD love justice,

I hate robbery and wrongdoing;

I will faithfully give them their recompense,

and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.

Their descendants shall be known among the nations,

and their offspring among the peoples;

all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people

whom the LORD has blessed.

I 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.

For 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.

Second Reading: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

My brothers and sisters, Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.

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

Gospel: St John 1:6-8,19-28

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

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, 'I am not the Messiah.' And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' 'Are you the prophet?' He answered, 'No.' Then they said to him, 'Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?' 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. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, 'Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?' John answered them, 'I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.' This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

A Reflection for The Second Sunday of Advent

Have you ever been called on to give a witness statement? I have once, not for a court but for an enquiry. If one is being asked about things that happened a while back, we probably all recognise that it can be difficult to remember details and I find that, the more I am pressed, the more uncertain I become. And yet, I recognise the need for as much accuracy as possible for those who are the subject of the enquiry. It means I have a little bit of sympathy for those being quizzed in recent weeks at the Covid enquiry, although many of them seem to have been canny enough to keep diaries. To be a witness is to speak the truth about something, but that thing need not necessarily be in the past.

'Witness' is a key word in John's Gospel. The writer refers to at least eight examples of witness to Jesus being the Son of God. There is the witness of Jesus himself, the witness of the Father, of Scripture and of Jesus works, of the Holy Spirit, of Jesus' disciples and other people he met, and, as we hear in today's passage, the witness of John the Baptist: He (John the Baptist) came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light but he came to testify to the light.

These verses also link to another great theme of John's Gospel, that of light. You are probably remarkably familiar with the verse that precedes today's passage: 'The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.' So, John the Baptist, who was presented to us in Mark's Gospel last week as the last in the line of Old Testament prophets, is presented to us today as a witness to the coming of Jesus, testifying to 'the Light'.

The priests and Levites were trying to figure out who he was. They knew he was the son of Zechariah the priest, so John was a priest by family descent, but he was not behaving as they might have expected, and then there was his unusual camel hair clothing and strange diet. He was an eccentric. There were various possibilities. Was he the Messiah? Was he Elijah – after all he looked like him? Was he another of the great prophets returned, perhaps Isaiah or Jeremiah?

John the Baptist's witness statement didn't lack certainty; he was quite clear who he was and was not, and he was none of those suggested. After John was born, we are told in Luke's Gospel that his father declared: 'You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way.' John's mission, his role, had been instilled in him since birth. So he returns to the words from Isaiah that we heard last week: 'I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord."' He is clear that he is pointing the way, directing them to another, warning them to be alert. Here, John the Baptist says, 'I am not' where later Jesus will say 'I am'.

But the priests and Levites remain curious. Their questions reflected their world view. Part of the end-time expectations of the Jews were of the return of Elijah and a prophet-like figure. If John was not the Messiah or one of those figures, why was he baptising people? Who gave him that right? There is some Old Testament precedence for baptism. The prophet Ezekiel says 'I will sprinkle clean water upon you and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses'. And the prophet Zechariah, not to be confused with John's father, looked forward to a day when 'a fountain will be opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to cleanse them from sin and impurity'. At the time of John the Baptist and Jesus, the Jews used ritual washing or immersion to achieve the ritual purity required in some circumstances, and it was also customary to immerse converts to Judaism. By baptising Jews, John the Baptist was implying that even Jews who kept, or tried to keep, the Law, needed cleansing.

But John the Baptist didn't want to waste time on who he was or who he was not, or on the religious authorities pre-conceived ideas about who is allowed to do what. He remained true to his calling, turning the attention away from himself and towards Jesus: 'Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me.' That's what they should be concerned about. And later, after Jesus' baptism, having fulfilled his calling, John the Baptist was content to fade into the background and let Jesus' ministry take centre stage.

The passage we heard from Isaiah this morning is also about calling: the calling of both the servant and the Messiah. It is the passage that Jesus later read in the synagogue at Nazareth. And it is also the calling of the church – to proclaim both the day of the Lord's favour and the day of vengeance. (Vengeance is, perhaps, better understood here as justice.) Things will not go on as they are for ever, God will bring them to an end one day. And, meanwhile, we have things to do. We are to bring the good news to the oppressed, to proclaim liberty to the captives - to spread the Gospel so people find the freedom that Christ offers.

How do we fulfil that calling to bring good news, to be witnesses for the Gospel? One way suggested in today's readings is through sharing our joy. The passage from Isaiah is full of the joy of the good news that world will ultimately reflect the glory of God. In Thessalonians, we are told 'Rejoice always!' This should be the natural condition of Christians.

Joy, as I have said before, is not the same as happiness. It may be like that sometimes, but life is tough and there are hard times and sad times. Christian joy is not about wearing a false persona of happiness but more about inner peace and hope, the assurance of being connected to God in Christ, knowing that we are living the life to which we are called and that God will not forsake us. We can be joyful because God is faithful and, even in the darkest times, we are given glimpses of light. We are called to tell our story of God's faithfulness to us, as individuals and as a church, to share the good news of Jesus, the Light of the world. We are expert witnesses of God's loving kindness towards us and, by telling others, can help them to find that relationship and that joy.