

Readings for the 3rd Sunday of Advent

FIRST READING: Isaiah 61:1-2a, 10-11

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah:

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, to announce a year of favor from the LORD and a day of vindication by our God. I rejoice heartily in the LORD, in my God is the joy of my soul; for he has clothed me with a robe of salvation and wrapped me in a mantle of justice, like a bridegroom adorned with a diadem, like a bride bedecked with her jewels. As the earth brings forth its plants, and a garden makes its growth spring up, so will the Lord GOD make justice and praise spring up before all the nations.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Luke 1:46-48, 49-50, 53-54.

My soul rejoices in my God.

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked upon his lowly servant. From this day all generations will call me blessed:

My soul rejoices in my God.

The Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his Name. He has mercy on those who fear him in every generation.

My soul rejoices in my God.

He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. He has come to the help of his servant Israel for he has remembered his promise of mercy.

My soul rejoices in my God.

SECOND READING: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

A reading from the first Letter of Saint Paul to the Thessalonians:

Brothers and sisters: Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophetic utterances. Test everything; retain what is good. Refrain from every kind of evil. May the God of peace make you perfectly holy and may you entirely, spirit, soul, and body, be preserved blameless for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will also accomplish it.

The word of the Lord.

GOSPEL: John 1:6-8, 19-28

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to John:

A man named John was sent from God. He came for testimony, to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to testify to the light. And this is the testimony of John. When the Jews from Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to him to ask him, "Who are you?" He admitted and did not deny it, but admitted, "I am not the Christ."

So they asked him, "What are you then? Are you Elijah?" And he said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No." So they said to him, "Who are you, so we can give an answer to those who sent us? What do you have to say for yourself?" He said: "I am the voice of one crying out in the desert, "make straight the way of the Lord," as Isaiah the prophet said." Some Pharisees were also sent. They asked him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ or Elijah or the Prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water; but there is one among you whom you do not recognize, the one who is coming after me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to untie." This happened in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the 3rd Sunday of Advent

Each of today's readings is chock-full of catch phrases. Most of them are familiar because Advent and Christmas occur each year. The Third Sunday of Advent has its own name too; Gaudete Sunday. There is always a problem with familiar phrases, seasons and feasts. We can take them for granted and overlook the powerful meaning they can convey. The powerful meaning has relevancy for today.

Isaiah said, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me." Who is "me?" Is it Isaiah, himself? Is it the coming Messiah? Is it Jesus? Is "me" you and me? The short answer is yes. As a prophet, Isaiah gave witness to God's word not just in his preaching and writing. Words are cheap. Isaiah also put the word of God into action by the way he lived his life. His preaching and writing also revealed God's plan.

What is the meaning of being anointed? Today we can take for granted fragrant, sweet-smelling perfume, cologne and deodorant to hide and prevent unpleasant odors. There is nothing like the smell of good food. Most of us can remember smells from our childhood. Nothing smells like home. There are certain perfumes and colognes that can trigger old memories. These are the building blocks to understand what Isaiah is saying.

Of all our senses, smell is most ephemeral. It is a critical sense to help us to determine safety or danger. We avoid places and things that smell bad. Smell is also essential for our sense of taste. Hold your nose while eating your favorite food to see what I mean. We only taste bitter, sour, salty, sweet, fat and pepper hot. Smell wafts on the air and depends on air movement; the source of a given aroma may be difficult to trace.

In Isaiah's day, pleasant smells went to God and symbolized God's presence. The smells of the so-called burnt offerings of Jewish temple sacrifice were those of roasting meat not burning animal carcasses. The aromas of cooking are pleasant; they would fill the temple. They fill our homes. Sweet aroma was the part of the sacrifice that went to God. The temple priests, attendants and their families would eat the meat. The spirit of God, likewise, would fill the temple. The scent of roasting marked the presence of God. One can see smoke, but not the aroma that lingers after the haze clears. No one can see the presence of God either. One could know God's presence through the presence of an unseen smell. Perfume, incense and cooking smells were symbols and signs of God being near.

Much of Jewish ritual takes place in a family home. People gathered together to pray and share a meal. The aromas of cooking the meal added to the notion that God gathered too, with them. Anointing was and is, in Judaism, the practice of pouring aromatic, perfumed oil over one's head or entire body. As a ritual, priests, prophets and kings had perfumed oil poured on them

to denote the moment that they assumed office and as the sign that the spirit of God rushed upon them. When a host received guests, the host would pour oil over their head as a sign of welcome. It also was a sign that God was near and gathered with them.

One who is anointed, in Hebrew, is called Messiah. The Greek word for the one who is anointed is Christ. As Moses was dying, having glimpsed the Promised Land and never actually arriving alive to it, God promised to raise up another, when needed, like Moses. This was a revelation of God's plan to send the Messiah as a savior. Moses role in the community was as priest, prophet and king. As priest, Moses offered sacrifice to God for sin, his own and of the Hebrew people. As Prophet he spoke God's word to the people. A prophet listens to hear God's word, not to foresee the future. As the one who led God's people from slavery in Egypt into freedom as they were about to enter the land of God's promise, he was king. God chose, called and guided Moses as God's own. God also did the same for the entire Hebrew people. God seeks a holy nation, a people set apart and a kingdom of priests.

Jesus is the promised Messiah. His anointing took place at a dinner just before he died. Each of the gospels has a similar story of a woman anointing Jesus feet. Through Jesus death on the cross, he redeemed from sin and death. In rising from the dead he has won for us the promise of eternal life. In his return to his Father, we have received the Holy Spirit and the promise of Jesus' return. When Jesus does return, he will establish the Kingdom of God forever. The Kingdom of God is the true land of promise. Moses may have glimpsed it as we can.

Each of us was anointed priest, prophet and king at our Baptism. We are all anointed ones who carry on Jesus' mission. We received the Holy Spirit through our being anointed at Confirmation. Those who are ordained priests are anointed upon receiving the Sacrament of Holy Orders. I always point out that Holy Orders comes from first being anointed at Baptism. If I were never baptized, I would never have been ordained. The oil we use for these rites is a perfumed oil called Chrism. The scent of the Chrism we use is more herbal than sweet. I would never use it as cologne. It is the sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit being upon us.

This is the long answer that explains the short one, yes.

The next phrase is rejoice always; pray without ceasing. The Latin word for rejoice is Gaudete. What does it mean to rejoice? There is a pun that comes to mind, Joyce and ReJoyce; identical twins. The word rejoice is joy with the prefix re attached. It means have joy again. What is joy? Paul did not say or mean, "Cheer up!" It is different from happiness and gladness; both of these are emotions or feelings. Feelings come and go; emotions may pass. Joy is more like the Theological Virtues; faith, hope and love. It endures. We can doubt but still believe through faith. We can still hope when all seems lost. We can always love when we are mad, sad, glad or afraid. Joy can be related to a sense of inner wellness in the midst of chaos. It can be the awareness of God's presence in troubled times. It can come while looking back at our lives lived, our families grown, or a lifetime of dedicated work.

The response for today is not a Psalm. It is Mary's prayer, the Magnificat. Mary prayed this prayer as a young, not-yet-married but pregnant young woman who has just arrived at her six-month pregnant cousin Elizabeth's house. She had little external support structures. When I put Mary's situation in terms that are not pious, that fact becomes a bit more clear. She had risked a judgment of adultery and the threat of execution as a result of her saying yes to what God asked of her. The words she has prayed have powerful meaning. She has relied, completely, on God. She chose well. She has remembered well and can rejoice. I wonder, given her situation, if she could still pray this prayer as she stood at the foot of her son's cross as he died in agony?

Today we face horrible things. The reality of 2020, with its pain and problems of pandemic, politics, partisanship, prejudice and privilege, has led us to know isolation, anxiety, and doubt. How can we rejoice? How could the Hebrew people pick up their harps and sing a song of praise to God by the rivers of Babylon? They did; their faith thrived and thrives to this day. The message of Paul to us is profound. It calls us to let go of our self pity and isolation. He calls us to remember that we are God's children whom he has chosen and called. We can remember the great gifts that God has given us. We are alive, we love, we hope and we believe. The gift is not in the things we have; they can remind of the things we have lost or haven't gotten. The gift is in the people we are and have become, by God's grace and providence. It is a gift within us, God through Jesus in the Holy Spirit. That is part of our inbuilt fabric. That is our Joy.

There's an old movie, *The Ruling Class*. It starred the late Peter O'Toole. He played the last of an old line of royalty. They were an eccentric and possibly mad bunch. He was named Jack but knew he was Jesus. This was a dark comedy and I won't bore you with many details. At one point, in the movie, a psychologist asked him when he came to know he was Jesus. O'Toole's character replied, "One day I was praying and discovered I was talking to myself." Sometimes we may wonder if God listens and hears the prayers we pray. It may seem, at times like these, that we talk to ourselves as we pray. Doesn't God know the state of the world? Wouldn't this be a good time for divine intervention, a miracle, the second coming or at least a little sign of recognition? I never fear such thoughts.

Prayer does not benefit God who made the entire cosmos and me. Prayer always benefits the one who prays. God want us to admit our doubt, sin and even anger. These burdens we can only release when we acknowledge them. God raises them up in us by God's grace. Jesus died to heal our burdens. Jesus told us, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart. You will find rest for your souls, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light." I trust Jesus; he meant what he said.

Pray without ceasing; how? That question has plagued humanity since Paul wrote it. Different religious movements and traditions have tried to interpret Paul's message. I began to prepare this reflection last Monday. Today is Thursday as I type. This preparation has guided my thoughts actively and peripherally all week. I have read, reflected, prayed and pondered the themes of scripture before putting my fingers to keys. What activities have been prayer and what have not? Normally, we think of prayers coming from us to God. What of the other way around? Prayer can come from God to us. I maintain that this happens more often than we are aware. We all have moments of insight. Things can come together. We see solutions to what seemed to be insurmountable problems. All of a sudden we may find our thoughts have turned to God. We can remember the faces of those we love. God works in those moments.

Again Paul wrote, "In the same way the Spirit comes to the aid of our weakness. We do not even know how we ought to pray, but through our inarticulate groans the Spirit himself is pleading for us, and God who searches our inmost being knows what the Spirit means, because he pleads for God's people as God himself wills; and in everything, as we know, he co-operates for good with those who love God and are called according to his purpose." Prayer is a relationship with God. Often we mistake one of the means to prayer as prayer itself; prayers. What God wants is each of us not our sheer multiplication of words. Our prayers are only a means to spend time with God. There are others. There is also the belief, knowledge and experience that God never leaves us. We are first people of faith. Faith is a gift that God has

given us. The fact of living God's gift may have been what Paul meant. All is a gift; all is a grace including being alive.

The gospel of John has many layers of meaning. He uses symbols in the action and words he uses. Sometimes his language can be ambivalent and even contradictory. His purpose is not to confuse us as readers but to get our attention and listen to the words more deeply. He called Jesus God's Word. Through the Word God spoke, God created the cosmos. God said, "Jesus?" Yet as God spoke the Word, it wasn't as we do; in vain. Go back to the story of creation in the book of Genesis. That is the context of God's creative use of the Word. When God speaks, what does God say? Let there be you and me, let there be love and life, let there be forgiveness and eternal life. What do we need? What God gives us as a gift; faith in God and in Jesus whom God sent.

We can speak the truth and not deny it either. You and I are neither God nor Messiah. Yet we are, like John, the ones God sent for testimony. By the lives we lead we witness to Jesus. God makes straight into our very being. We, like John, cry out from the desert that is 2020 for the presence of God that is already here. Without God we have and are nothing, alone. God has promised presence with us. We can pray, for we already know it, "Lord I am not worthy to receive you. Only say the Word and I shall be healed. The Word God spoke is Jesus.

God is with us always. Through faith we know this even when we don't feel this. We are faithful. One can only rejoice in God's presence even through tears and terror. As we live, we share God's life. We know this by God's Word, Jesus.

As we keep one another safe, we act by God's Word.

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December 12-13, 2020