

Readings for the Second Thursday of Advent

FIRST READING: Isaiah 41:13-20

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah:

I am the LORD, your God, who grasp your right hand; It is I who say to you, "Fear not, I will help you." Fear not, O worm Jacob, O maggot Israel; I will help you, says the LORD; your redeemer is the Holy One of Israel. I will make of you a threshing sledge, sharp, new, and double-edged, To thresh the mountains and crush them, to make the hills like chaff. When you winnow them, the wind shall carry them off and the storm shall scatter them. But you shall rejoice in the LORD, and glory in the Holy One of Israel. The afflicted and the needy seek water in vain, their tongues are parched with thirst. I, the LORD, will answer them; I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them. I will open up rivers on the bare heights, and fountains in the broad valleys; I will turn the desert into a marshland, and the dry ground into springs of water. I will plant in the desert the cedar, acacia, myrtle, and olive; I will set in the wasteland the cypress, together with the plane tree and the pine, That all may see and know, observe and understand, That the hand of the LORD has done this, the Holy One of Israel has created it.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 145:1 and 9, 10-11, 12-13ab

The Lord is gracious and merciful; slow to anger, and of great kindness.

I will extol you, O my God and King, and I will bless your name forever and ever. The LORD is good to all and compassionate toward all his works.

The Lord is gracious and merciful; slow to anger, and of great kindness.

Let all your works give you thanks, O LORD, and let your faithful ones bless you. Let them discourse of the glory of your Kingdom and speak of your might.

The Lord is gracious and merciful; slow to anger, and of great kindness.

Let them make known to men your might and the glorious splendor of your Kingdom. Your Kingdom is a Kingdom for all ages, and your dominion endures through all generations.

The Lord is gracious and merciful; slow to anger, and of great kindness.

GOSPEL: Matthew 11:11-15

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew:

Jesus said to the crowds: "Amen, I say to you, among those born of women there has been none greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the Kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now, the Kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent are taking it by force. All the prophets and the law prophesied up to the time of John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah, the one who is to come. Whoever has ears ought to hear."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the Second Thursday of Advent

Why did God refer to Jacob as a worm and Israel as a maggot? Those are two pretty disgusting images. Who were these guys? Actually, Jacob and Israel are one in the same person. Jacob was a son of Isaac and a grandson of Abraham. He was a twin, the second-born of the two. He tricked, according to the story in Genesis, his elder brother, Esau, out of his first-born status with a bowl of stew. He tricked his father into giving his blessing, as first-born. The old man was blind. Jacob conned his father through lies and deceit. The story of Genesis revealed that Jacob was born as a breech baby and came out feet first. His name means heel.

I know, this great patriarch of the Jewish people was a wily scoundrel. Yet, God chose him. He may have gotten away with his shenanigans because God's spirit was upon him. He had God's blessing first. He received the name Israel after he wrestled with a messenger of God, an angel all night to a draw. The name means wrestling with God. This sounds a bit odd. God's ways are mysterious. Don't we sometimes wonder about the ways of God? Don't we once in a while struggle with what God has provided? Don't we defy God when we sin? God has chosen each of us too. We have faith because, like Jacob/Israel, God has faith in us. It's easy to forget that God, as love, is infinite and unconditional. God has offered us, through Jesus, the same gift he offered Jacob/Israel; the way to salvation.

Why the nasty name calling? We have a saying that we share with Islam; God is Great. None of us is God. Jacob/Israel was not God. He and we are all sinners who need God's mercy and grace to live and thrive as God's beloved children. What can we possibly offer God? What can we give that will add to God's Greatness? Since we, ourselves, have been created through God's love and in God's image and likeness; absolutely nothing. God already has us. We have come from God, God lives with us as we live and when we die, we return to God. Without God, we have very little.

Isaiah's prophesy promised what God will provide. He used a metaphor of terra-forming and earth moving. In our mechanized world, all these things are possible; we have the technology and machines that do those things. People in Isaiah's time did not. Isaiah has implied that the transformation project revolves around the human heart. God's work will open up, widen, level out and nurture God's love in, with and through each of us. Without God we are like worms and maggots. Yet, even these are God's creatures too. As I write this I remember a parody by Monty Python, "All Things Bright and Beautiful," called, "All Things Dull and Ugly." It can be found on the internet. It's worth a listen. It may sound a bit sacrilegious, but it's true. We don't always have to like the gifts God has offered to us. Look at the pandemic, for instance. God's presence remained with Jacob/Israel. God remains with the Israelite people today. God is with us now.

Only one human being was also God, Jesus, God's son. As Messiah and savior, he gave witness to the eternal and unconditional love that God has for us. I remember the prayer of Mary in the Gospel of Luke, the Magnificat. My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my Savior for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant. From this day all generations will call me blessed the Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his Name. The sentiments of this passage are reflected in this prayer. We find greatness and holiness only in God, through Jesus.

I had an opportunity to meet "The Greatest." That was, of course, Muhammad Ali. This was in fall of 1967 or spring of 1968. I was a freshman at Quigley North, of happy memory. Quigley was the Archdiocesan high-school seminary located at the corner of Chestnut and Rush, then, across the street from the old Whiskey A-Go-Go. In gym class, when weather was pleasant, we would run from the school, across Michigan and Chicago Avenues to Lake Shore Park, three blocks from the school over looking Lake Michigan as its name implies. A classmate and I were running, in our gym togs to the park. As we rounded Bonwit-Teller, at the corner of Chestnut and Michigan, the two of us literally ran into Muhammad Ali. It was like hitting a mountain; he was in his prime. At that time, a lot of people still referred to him as Cassius Clay. Startled, he wanted to know who we were, why we were there and why we ran into him. I remember we told him we were from Quigley and we were running to Lake Shore Park. His response was, "What's a Kwiggley?" We explained that it was a seminary and we were studying to be priests. This intrigued him and we chatted, amicably with him a bit more. I was struck with his interest in us, his warmth and wit. He encouraged our quest for physical fitness, of whom, at the time, he was a prime specimen. From that day on I referred to him as Muhammad Ali. Each time a reference to some one's greatness comes up in scriptures, I remember that incident and chance encounter fondly.

Matthew's gospel has a few curious themes today. Why did Jesus describe John and his own followers as he did? How did people try to seize God's Kingdom by force and violence? How are things different now? The main difference was Jesus. Jesus offered the Kingdom of God to the world. As the Messiah, his mission was to die on the cross, rise from the dead, return to the father, send the Holy Spirit and return at the end of the age. Through the cross Jesus redeemed us. Through his resurrection we have the promise of eternal life and the Kingdom. Through his return to the father and sending the Spirit he established his Church. When Jesus returns, He will establish the Kingdom of God forever. With Jesus the Kingdom began. The Kingdom of God is here, but not yet.

The prophets, priests, kings and people who lived before Jesus never experienced the Messianic age. They did not yet enter the Kingdom. We believe in Jesus. It is not clear if John was a disciple or not. We do know that many people believed and some still believe that John was the Messiah. All four of the gospels have John saying that he wasn't the Messiah. He points to Jesus as the one. The gospel of Luke has Jesus and John being relatives. John sent his disciples to question Jesus as to his identity and mission. Some of the envoys John sent became Jesus' disciples. The scriptures never say anything about John's faith in Jesus. I like to stick to what scripture says.

We have all been born, by faith and Baptism into the Kingdom. We were all born during the Messianic age. We are promised heirs of God's kingdom and have no need to seize it. We believe in God and in Jesus, God's son. Because of God's gift of Faith we are children of God's promise and the siblings of Jesus. We can call God as Jesus did; Father and call Jesus; Brother. We are not really greater than John. We are members of Jesus' Church and on the path to the Kingdom.

God is Great and shares with us, through Jesus, God's greatness. We can know God's loving presence at any time and in any situation. We can find God in peaceful times and in chaos. We can know God when we gather together or alone in solitude. We have accepted Jesus' promise of the Kingdom. We await his return as we strive to live the life God gave us.

May the greatness of God remain our strength and motivation to live and care for each other.

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