

Sunday, December 11, 2011

Third Sunday in Advent, Year B

Isaiah 61: 1-2

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8, 19-28

Rejoice in the Lord always!

[Jesus] came to Nazareth... and entering the synagogue...he stood up to do the reading. When the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed him...he found the passage where it was written: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, therefore he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted...to announce a year of favor from the Lord" (Luke 4:18,19).

With these words Jesus announced that in his person the messianic era had come. 'Rejoice, O Israel! Rejoice O Jerusalem! Rejoice ye nations! For your God has come to save you and bring you to a glory and splendor greater than you have ever known.'

The Isaiah whom Jesus quoted, known as Third Isaiah, was commissioned by God to be a prophet to the Jewish people after their return from exile. This prophet was called by God to console a dispirited and oppressed people. Some scholars place his writings at a time when the restored Jerusalem was no more than a miserable village inhabited by a mixed population.<sup>1</sup> The prophet is called to bring the good news that God is about to return to Zion, restoring Jerusalem, inaugurating God's sovereignty. This gospel of good news is addressed to the poor, the oppressed, the little ones to whom justice has been denied, to those whose spirit has been broken, to those who mourn the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. God's restored rule will usher in a kingdom of righteousness and justice.<sup>2</sup> It will be a time of unrestrained joy.

The prophet pointed not only to a future that lay more or less near with the physical renewal of Jerusalem and its temple, but pointed down through the ages to a new creation and the kingdom of God come among us in the person of the Christ, the Anointed One par excellence. He will inaugurate the New Jerusalem by his passion and death. This is the New Jerusalem where "God shall dwell among human beings. He shall dwell with them and they shall be his people and he shall be their God who is always with them. He shall wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, crying out or pain, for the former world has passed away" (Revelation 21:3-4). And this will be a home for all nations where all peoples will worship at the altar of the Lamb. In the coming of Christ this kingdom has already come among us.

The foundations and buildings of the New Jerusalem are already being built up even as we worship here together.

Note that the people to whom both Isaiah's and Christ's message are addressed are the poor, the broken-hearted, the captives, those in need of healing, those who mourn. The term "the poor" inspires and explains the other terms. "The poor of God" is basic to both the Old and New Testament. The Hebrew word for "poor" literally means "bowed down." It describes an attitude of humble submission. The "poor of Yahweh" stand before God, whose kindness they recognize, whose mystery they adore, and for whom they wait with utter confidence. It is the cry of these poor – the persecuted, afflicted, and broken-hearted that we often hear in the psalms. As friends and servants of God, they can count on God. It is to them that the kingdom of heaven belongs. Jesus calls them and those who become like them "blessed."<sup>3</sup>

The poverty of which Scripture speaks is more than a material phenomenon. The disadvantaged may count on God's help in a particular way, but the hearts of those who have nothing can also be filled with greed for material things. Rather, the poverty and broken-heartedness here is a witness that possession is all about self-giving in service, and openness to God's ways.<sup>4</sup>

The response to this good news, whether it is the rebuilding of a destroyed Jerusalem or the coming of the heavenly city and the initiation of the Messianic kingdom is one of joy. Today, on Gaudete Sunday, the liturgy calls us to rejoice "always." Many people, including the poor mentioned above live in sorrow and anguish. The joy to which we are called is not the feeble attempt at an external joy that tries to hide a broken heart. That would ignore the fact that Christian joy is a fruit of the Spirit which cannot be separated from the other gifts of the Spirit: love, peace, patient endurance, kindness, generosity, faith, mildness and chastity (Galatians 5:22). It is founded on the certitude that Christ opens for us the "Way of salvation," that he has opened the kingdom of God and will take us with him into glory.<sup>5</sup> I am sure we all know people who have suffered greatly in one way or another and yet are possessed of a deep peace and joy, because their hope is in Christ.

Today, Gaudete Sunday, marks the mid-point of Advent, and our liturgy points us to the dawn of Christ's coming. At this time we are busy about many things getting ready to celebrate Christ coming among us. As we write our cards, wrap our gifts, get the tree and hurry about the many tasks associated with the observance of Christmas, we need to contemplate the way the Lord came among us, divesting himself of his very Godhead, humbling himself, obedient even to death on the cross. He came out of love to serve. It was for this he was anointed. We, who await his coming, were also anointed at our baptism to continue Christ's mission. That is our joy, and that joy is witness to the world. Come, Lord Jesus, and do not delay!

Fr. Boniface Von Nell

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup>. John L. McKenzie, Dictionary of the Bible (Milwaukee, Bruce, 1965) 402.
- <sup>2</sup>. Joseph Blenkinsopp, Isaiah 56-66 (N.Y., Doubleday, Anchor Bible, 2000) 223-335.
- <sup>3</sup>. Days of the Lord: Volume 1, Season of Advent, Season of Christmas/Epiphany (Collegeville, Minn., The Liturgical Press, 1991) 107-108/
- <sup>4</sup>. Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI, Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration (N.Y., Doubleday, 2007) 77.
- <sup>5</sup>. Days of the Lord, 109