

### Third Sunday of Advent, Year A

Advent is a season of waiting, a season of preparing so that we may be able to welcome the coming of Jesus with pure hearts. The purple colour of the vestments and of the Advent candles highlight our need for disciplined attentiveness and the courage to alter ways of thinking and behaving that are blocking life. However, the liturgical colour today changes to a rose pink. This is because the Readings of today's Mass move away from our need for repentance to focus on the joy of what we are about to receive. We used to call this *Gaudete* Sunday - a Latin expression meaning 'rejoice', from the words of today's Entrance Antiphon: 'Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say rejoice! The Lord is near'.

The First Reading sets the tone for the Mass. The prophet Isaiah can hardly wait for the time when we who are in many ways so blind will see: see who God is and therefore who we really are; see the wonderful destiny to which we are called and how we are to live so as to reach our goal; see through the distractions that take us nowhere; see what real matters. He can hardly wait for the time when we learn to listen - listen to the gentle word of God coming to us through nature, reassuring us of God's love in the sorrowful as well as the joyful events of our life, and inviting us into silent communion at the depths of our hearts.

Often enough we find that we are paralysed: we are stuck, unable to move, unable to find a way through the problems that surround and overwhelm us. Isaiah is convinced that we will find a way: the lame will walk. We might wonder what is the meaning of our life, what contribution we might make to the world, what is the value of our loving. The prophet promises us that we will find our voice, for we all have a song to sing. God will come to us and our hearts will rejoice. When our hearts are fearful, he tells us to have courage: 'Here is your God. He will come and save you. He will guide you along the way of holiness'.

We know the story of Simeon. When Jesus was a small baby, his mother and father brought him to the temple. There they met an old man called Simeon. He is a symbol of all those saints of the Older Testament who longed for the coming of the Messiah. A profound joy welled up in Simeon's heart as he took the child into his arms and prayed: 'Now you can dismiss your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel'(Luke 2:29-32).

John of the Cross composed a short poem (Romance 6) in which he reflects on the long years of waiting for the coming of the Messiah.

1. In these and other prayers a long time passed;  
But in the later years their fervour greatly increased;
2. When the aged Simeon burned with longing,  
and pleaded with God that he might see this day.
3. And so the Holy Spirit answered the good old man,  
and gave him his word that he would not see death
4. until he saw Life descending from the heights,  
until he took God himself into his own hands,  
held Him in his arms, and pressed Him to himself.

We come now to the Second Reading. Those farmers among you will appreciate James's image of the farmer. While he is waiting patiently for the rain he does not sit on his hands and do nothing. He continues working the farm as he gazes with hope at the sky. So it is to be with us. As we await the coming of the Lord we know what we are to do: we are to keep working at love. In the Gospel our gaze is turned to Jesus and we are encouraged to ask ourselves the question: Is Jesus the one for whom I am waiting or am I looking for someone different? Matthew gives us a checklist. Let us test ourselves by it. When you are in communion with Jesus, especially when you are in communion with him here at the Eucharist, but also when you are in communion with him in your daily life, do you notice that you can see better: see what to do, see how to respond, see the meaning of your life, see how to love? Do you listen better - to the hearts of those close to you, to the cry of those who are hurting, to the inspiration of God's Spirit in your heart?

Jesus asks the disciples of John the Baptist whether they are scandalised in him? Many people, then and now, think of salvation in terms very different from Jesus. They were looking for someone who would free them from Roman occupation and make them more prosperous, more successful. They wanted more bread for their stomachs. These are legitimate aspirations, but Jesus knew that achieving such things depends on a whole range of circumstances over which we have little or no control, and he knew too that God loves the world. God does not control it. Please God we will lead peaceful and happy lives. O that everyone did! God would be as delighted as we would be if that happened. But this is not what Jesus promised. He promised a peace that the world cannot give. He promised us a life that would have meaning because it would be a life of love whatever our circumstances. He promised to share with us the intimacy of his communion with God.

Could the disciples of John the Baptist handle a Messiah who suffers with us, a Messiah who shares our fragility and vulnerability, a Messiah who knew persecution and abandonment and betrayal and who would suffer the terrible ignominy and awful pain of crucifixion? Can we handle that? Are we willing to measure ourselves and others by our love, or are we going to be seduced into measuring people by their productivity, their contribution to the economic welfare of the community? It is good to contribute to the economic welfare of the community (so long as that is truly what we are doing, and not using it as camouflage for personal aggrandisement), but the measure of our humanity is the measure of our love. This is what Jesus teaches us.

Christmas is fast approaching. As we prepare to take the child Jesus into our arms, like Simeon, let us get in touch with our longings, resist the distractions that can clutter this sacred season of rejoicing and pray that the love of God will purify our hearts and minds so that this Christmas will be for us and for those we love a season of profound and lasting joy.