

THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT - A

On this third Sunday we have John the Baptist pointing out Jesus albeit indirectly to his disciples and there is a lesson for all; if the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are brought back to life and the Good News is proclaimed by Jesus who must Jesus be? The first reading from Isaiah chapter 35, in contrast to the sentence pronounced on Edom in the previous chapter, gives an account of the blessings in store for Jerusalem following the Exile and possibly in the heavenly Jerusalem. There is clearly an echo with the gospel reading. The second reading is from the infrequently read letter of St James in which we are encouraged to 'be patient...until the Lord's coming' for James this is the second coming of Christ.

The **First Reading** comes from the prophet Isaiah, the first part of the book, chs.1-39. Isaiah was born about 765 BC and received his prophetic vocation while in the Temple in Jerusalem. His mission was to proclaim the fall of Israel and Judah as punishment for the nation's infidelity. He exercised his ministry for forty years and proclaimed his teaching in four distinct periods. It seems Isaiah finished his teaching by 700, after which date we know nothing of the prophet. There is a tradition that his life ended in martyrdom. His writings show Isaiah to be a poet of genius. The revelation of the transcendence of God and of human unworthiness he received in the Temple at the time of his call left a lasting mark on the prophet. For Isaiah God is awesome, a God who is Holy, Strong, the Mighty One, the King. We are his creatures defiled by sin for which God demands reparation insisting on just living among his people and sincerity in divine worship. Isaiah is the prophet of faith, he insists the people should trust in God in times of national crisis, by this alone will salvation be attained. Isaiah's hope is that a remnant of the people will recognise the Messiah for its King. This Messiah is to be a descendant of David. A prophet of considerable standing, Isaiah gathered round him a school of disciples who preserved his teaching.

The reading, 35.1-6,10, is from the section of the book headed 'Poems on Israel and Judah.' Chapters 34/35 are sometimes known as the Little Apocalypse. They contain a description of the final terrible battles to be waged by Yahweh against the nations in particular Edom (ch.34) followed by a prediction of the Last Judgement which will establish Jerusalem in all its glory (ch.35). Our reading is an extract from this second chapter in which the lands of Israel are encouraged to 'rejoice and bloom; like the asphodel, let it burst into flower, let it rejoice and sing for joy.' The asphodel a plant of the lily family, sometimes called the White Asphodel or King's Spear, was said by poets to cover the Elysian meads, the abode of the blessed; a plant associated with eternal happiness. 'The glory of Lebanon is bestowed on it, the splendour of Carmel and Sharon; then they will see the glory of Yahweh, the splendour of our God.' Lebanon, the word comes from the Hebrew word that means 'white', was renowned for its snow covered peaks which rise to 9,850 feet and for the tall and beautiful cedar forests. Carmel is a range of hills rising to 550 feet with a headland jutting out into the Mediterranean Sea famous for the contest between Elijah and the prophets of Baal in 1Kings18 and Sharon or Plain of Sharon was a widening plain to the south of Carmel covered with thick oak forests across which the streams flowed sluggishly. In chapter 33 before the hoped for deliverance Isaiah says: 'The land pines away in mourning, Lebanon is withering with shame, Sharon has become a wasteland, Bashan and Carmel are shuddering.' Although Sharon could boast of a crocus, a 'lily among the brambles' its biblical picture is a forbidding jungle yet here it is transformed to have a certain splendour and in the following verses man too should not be faint-hearted because God is coming. We are then given a picture of what it will be like when God comes and are told about the 'everlasting joy on their faces' as the people enter Zion.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 145.6-10, is a hymn to the God of help. The Lord in the psalm is the God of Zion who is there in times of need, several occasions are mentioned, and once established his reign will last forever.

The **Second Reading** is from the letter of James which became accepted only gradually by the Church as inspired scripture. The author James is thought to be James the brother of the Lord, not the apostle James the son of Zebedee. This is the James mentioned in Acts who was put to death by the Jews c.62. There is much discussion about authorship, date, style of writing and a clash between Paul and James' teaching which need not concern us here. I have given the most popular view. The letter is addressed to the twelve tribes of the Dispersion, i.e. the Jewish Christians scattered over the Graeco-Roman world. The author presumes a familiarity with the OT. The letter consists of a series of moral exhortations: how to behave in time of trial, the origin of temptation, how to control the tongue, the power of prayer and in chapter 5 the classic text used in the anointing of the sick. The letter has two main themes the first praises the poor and threatens the rich; the second insists that Christians must do good and not be content with a faith that produces nothing.

The reading, 5.7-10, deals with the coming of the Lord. We must be patient like the farmer waiting for the harvest because 'the Lord's coming will be soon.' The expectation of Christ's coming is the motive for Christian patience. Then we have a moral exhortation not to complain against one another and an encouragement to follow the example of the prophets who spoke in Christ's name.