

THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT – B

On this third Sunday, Gaudete Sunday from the opening Latin words of the introit, we listen to a reading from the gospel according to John and we learn who John the Baptist is and who he is not and then we get a reference to ‘the one who is coming after me’ unknown to the Pharisees and their messengers because of their lack of faith. The first reading continues with the prophet Isaiah, words which speak of the prophet’s mission and are applied to Jesus’ mission on earth. Jesus will use these words when he reads the lesson in the synagogue at Nazareth. The second reading gives us Paul’s encouraging words to the Thessalonians. They must be full of joy and pray constantly giving thanks to God that they may be perfect and holy for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The **First Reading** comes from the third part of Isaiah. This work, Isaiah 56-66, is a composite collection, its various parts dating from before the end of the Exile, 538 B.C., to the rebuilding of the Temple in 520 B.C. Taken as a whole this last part of the book of Isaiah seems to be the work of Second Isaiah’s disciples composed sometime after the return from exile. It can be considered the final product of the Isaian tradition, active from the days of the great eighth century prophet himself.

The reading, 61.1-2,10-11, begins with the prophet’s mission, he has received a message of consolation from God. He is sent to bring good news, glad tidings of God’s imminent intervention soothing the broken-hearted, liberating those held captive or imprisoned by the manner of their lives and the following verses to v.9 continue to describe the wonders of God’s intervention including ‘I shall make an everlasting covenant with them.’ (I suggest you read down to v.9.) The reading concludes with a prayer of thanksgiving, vv.10-11, exulting and praising God ‘for he has wrapped me in the garment of salvation’ and ‘makes saving justice and praise spring up in the sight of the nations.’ A wonderful reading as we wait prayerfully to celebrate the birth of Christ.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, is taken from Mary’s song of praise, the Magnificat, spoken after she has been greeted by her kinswoman Elizabeth. Mary praises God in response to Elizabeth’s words ‘Yes, blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled.’ Just as the thanksgiving prayer in the first reading gives praise to God for what he has done for the Israelites returned from exile so now Mary gives praise to God for what he has realised in her and for his goodness to those in need as he promised all those years ago to Abraham and his descendants.

The **Second Reading** comes from the first letter of St Paul to the Thessalonians. Paul founded the Church in Thessalonica on his 2nd missionary journey in the summer of the year 50. He wrote his first letter to the Thessalonians in the winter of 50/51, some of his earliest writing. In the opening chapters Paul writes very affectionately to his converts now undergoing persecution. In the latter part of the letter he gives some practical suggestions including answers to questions about what happens to people when they die and about Christ’s Second Coming, the *Parousia*. This letter along with the second one are important because they give us Paul’s teaching about the end of time and also give us Paul’s thinking at this time which was, how did Christ’s Resurrection from the dead and his Second Coming bring salvation to his converts whether alive or dead?

The reading, 5.16-24, comes at the end of the letter where Paul is telling the Thessalonians to be watchful while awaiting the coming of the Lord. He knows that they are well aware that ‘the Day of the Lord is going to come like a thief in the night’ and he encourages them and tells them to encourage each other and strengthen one another and to be at peace with one another aiming for what is best and then the reading begins with Paul telling the Thessalonians, ‘Always be joyful, pray constantly and for all things give thanks; this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus.’ They must listen to the Spirit, the gift of the messianic era and hold on to what is good. The reading concludes with Paul’s closing prayer that their ‘spirit, life and body be kept blameless;’ ‘spirit’ meaning the innermost depths of the human being open and awake to the spirit. Paul ends expressing his certain faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. Notice, as in the letter to the Philippians, 4.4, Paul wishes the Thessalonians ‘joy’ not ‘happiness’. Joy is one of the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5.22), even the word ‘rejoice’, our translation, fails to capture its true meaning, it is too external. ‘Joy’ as Paul uses the word brings inner peace from the knowledge that we are gathered into the love Jesus in the Father.