

## THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT - C

The gospel reading tells of Elizabeth's joy and also the joy of the child in her womb for the child Mary is carrying will be God's response to the drama of humanity in search of true peace. The first reading invites us to consider Bethlehem and the one to be born there who will be the fulfilment of all God's promises from the time of Abraham. The second reading is a meditation on the real purpose of Christ's advent into our world: 'I am coming to obey your will.' As the liturgy unfolds the events of Christ's life we will see how completely this child whose birth we celebrate, obeyed his Father's will.

The **First Reading** is from the prophet Micah. He is one of the minor prophets found. Micah exercised his ministry before and after the fall of Samaria in 721, a contemporary of Hosea and Isaiah. His book falls into four parts alternating between threat and condemnation and promises of hope: 1. Threats against Israel. 2. Promises to Jerusalem. 3. More threats against Israel. 4. Hope for the future of Jerusalem. Not all the words found in the book are thought to come from Micah's mouth. Like all the prophets Micah was keenly aware of his call and it made him fearless in prophesying Israel's guilt: the moneyed capitalist, usury, deceitful trading, family rivalry, avaricious priests, tyrants and venal judges. Against such Micah's word is: 'this is what Yahweh asks of you: only this, to act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your God.' Although God has decreed punishment, Samaria will be destroyed and Jerusalem left a heap of ruins, yet Micah is not without hope he foretells the birth in Ephrathah of a king who will bring peace.

The reading, 5.1-4, comes from the second part of the book where Micah has been speaking in the previous verses about the pride of the fortified Jerusalem and now contrasts it with the humble state of Ephrathah from which salvation will come. It is from Ephrathah which for Micah has the meaning 'fruitful' that the liberator will come and Micah is thinking of Bethlehem and the ancient origin of king David's dynasty. The evangelists interpreted this passage as a prophecy of Christ's birth which is how we reflect on the passage. The origin of this place goes back to the days of old it was always part of God's plan and when the time comes 'she who is to give birth gives birth' a reference to the mother of the Messiah, and reminds us of Isaiah's words: 'the young woman is with child and will soon give birth to a son whom she will call Immanuel.' Once this has happened the sons of Israel will return and be fed by this shepherd child through the power of God's Spirit and they will find security and peace. This is what the child of Bethlehem has done for us.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 79.2-3,15-16,18-19, is a psalm for the restoration of Israel which could apply equally to the north, Israel, laid waste by the Assyrians in 721 or Judah, Jerusalem was sacked by Nebuchadnezzar in 587. While the psalmist is thinking of the re-unification of the kingdom, reviving the vine (Israel) God originally planted the words of the psalm for us speak of Christ and the purpose of his coming, of his visit to help and protect us so that we may never again forsake the Lord our God.

The **Second Reading** is from the letter to the Hebrews. This wonderful letter to the Jewish Christians was for a time attributed to Paul's pen but now this is considered not to be the case although he is considered to have had some indirect influence on the letter's contents. It would seem from internal evidence that the letter was written about 67AD. The letter is addressed to Jewish people who have a good knowledge of the covenant God made with their people, and who became Christians. They left Jerusalem and with an uncertain faith, they yearn for the splendour of the ceremonies carried out in the Temple. They are tempted to revert to Judaism, but the writer is intent on preventing this by helping them to see their new life in Christ. They are on a new exodus to the Promised Land (heaven), with Christ, not Moses, as their leader whose one sacrifice on the Cross replaces the many sacrifices of the old priesthood. The letter is a good teaching letter for us showing the harmony between the Old and New Testaments.

The reading, 10.5-10, is part of a summary, 10.1-18, teaching that Christ's sacrifice is superior to the sacrifices of the Mosaic Law. The previous verses have stated that the sacrifices of the old law were 'quite incapable of bringing the worshippers to perfection' the sacrifices being 'repeatedly offered year after year.' If the sacrifices had been effective and purified the worshippers they would have no awareness of sin, so repetition would have been needless, but sacrifices of bulls and goats were incapable of such purification. 'That is why Christ said, on coming into the world...' the beginning of the reading. God did not want the OT sacrifices for God took no pleasure in them but for his will to be fulfilled perfectly. This Christ achieved by dying on the Cross which abolished all the former sacrifices. The author of Hebrews is trying to teach the Jewish converts that it is no use hankering after the old Temple sacrifices and for us the Incarnation cannot be seen as a cosy baby in a crib, the Incarnation must lead on to Calvary if God's will is to be fulfilled