

3rd Sunday of Advent (December 15th, 2019)

This is Gaudete (Latin for “rejoice”) Sunday as we are half way through Advent.¹ The Church uses this passage for the third Sunday in Advent to encourage the faithful in joyous hope that God will come and bring salvation.¹⁴ This season is not merely about remembering and waiting for the birth of the Savior, but also about anticipating the Second Coming.² The words of this marvelous passage were addressed to a nation cut down and in exile.¹⁶

Isaiah 35:1-6a, 10

After numerous prophetic condemnations of sin and evil in Isaiah, this passage offers a positive vision of the day of the Lord which will include three reasons for rejoicing. These wonders address three major sources of suffering and despair in the time of Isaiah: wrestling a living out of arid land is a tough existence but it will blossom and thrive. Living with disabilities is difficult in any age but even more difficult when there was no support or welfare program but those who are oppressed by infirmities will be healed and made whole and finally, living in exile is painful for any people, and even more so for Israel, whose faith was so closely linked to the land that God had given them. Now they are told that the exiled Israelites will be ransomed and will return to Jerusalem in a joyful procession!¹

1The desert and the parched land will exult; the steppe will rejoice and bloom. This is flat, barren, treeless land. God will visit his people in exile in Babylon (Iraq) and the desert land between there and Judah will be turned into a paradise.⁴

2They will bloom with abundant flowers, and rejoice with joyful song. The glory of Lebanon Located on a range of coastal mountains, this well watered area had an abundant growth of trees and vegetation and is especially noted for its magnificent forests and many cedar trees.³ **will be given to them, the splendor of Carmel** This heavily forested mountain ascends steeply from the sea and the surrounding countryside and is thus prominent in appearance.³ **and Sharon;** The plain of Sharon is a beautiful, fertile coastal plain covered with luxuriant vegetation.³ **they will see the glory of the Lord, the splendor of our God.**

3Strengthen the hands that are feeble, make firm the knees that are weak,

4say to those whose hearts are frightened: Be strong, fear not! Here is your God, he comes with vindication; God will act as the people’s vindicator, their next of kin who will avenge the wrongs done to them.⁴ **with divine recompense he comes to save you.**

5Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the deaf be cleared; The people with infirmities will be healed and made whole and ready for their homeward journey to Zion.⁴

6athen will the lame leap like a stag, then the tongue of the mute will sing.

10Those whom the Lord has ransomed will return and enter Zion (Jerusalem) singing, crowned with everlasting joy; they will meet with joy and gladness, sorrow and mourning will flee. Those in exile or the bondage of sin will be ransomed and they will return to Jerusalem where only the just can dwell. In God’s new Israel there will be no sin and consequently, no infirmity. Isaiah’s prophecies on the holy remnant will then be fulfilled...The repatriation of 538 and later dates fell far short of this ideal. God’s ideal is rarely realized to the full because of man’s lack of cooperation. Faith and hope are kept alive and mankind is told to look ever to the future. Christians see much of this prophecy realized in the healing ministry of Jesus but the message of the Apocalypse bids us look to the future and await the perfect fulfillment of these oracles in the heavenly Jerusalem.⁴

James 5:7-10

The Epistle of James presents a wonderful, ever-timely plan of life for the Christian. Here James comments upon the proper attitude toward the “coming of the Lord.” He compares our state to that of the farmer

who is waiting for the “yield of the soil.”¹⁵ We do not often have the privilege of reading from this short book. In the tradition of the Church, the writer was probably the leader of the Jerusalem community until he was stoned to death in 62 A.D.⁽¹⁵⁾ Earlier in this chapter the rich have been threatened with the coming judgment of wrath and now those who suffer are to be consoled by that same judgment.⁵

7Be patient, Patience is a characteristic of the virtue of Fortitude and one of the “fruits of the Spirit” listed in Galatians. It includes overtones of lengthy suffering and endurance in the face of trial or pain. The most obvious sign of impatience is grumbling and complaining. St. Benedict wrote in his Rule for Monasteries: “First and foremost, there must be no word or sign of the evil of grumbling, no manifestation of it for any reason at all.”⁷ **brothers and sisters, until the coming of the Lord.** The people are to be patient not only in the face of outrageous injustice but also toward the ordinary trials of life.⁵ **See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains.** “The early and the late rains” was an Old Testament expression that was used often in the enumeration of God’s gifts. The early (October-November) and the late (April-May) showers were essential to the farmers of the area.⁵

8You too must be patient. Given a choice between easy and hard, beautiful and ugly, consoling and discouraging, stable and unstable, popular and unpopular, wealthy and poor, St. John of the Cross said that we should always opt for the worst or the least of all things. Why? Because the power of Christ is felt more in the Cross than in the comfort. Experience shows that those who have been tested by sacrifice are tougher and better Christians than those who have been spared from it. The Church was born from persecution and it is at its best when persecuted!⁸ **Make your hearts firm, because the coming of the Lord is at hand.** The prospect of the parousia or Second Coming of the Lord is a motive of hope and strength in the midst of present trials.⁵ Genuine Christians are not afraid of God’s coming; they long for it and even hasten it⁽⁶⁾ through holiness of life.¹⁷ (2Peter 3:12) They also pray for it in the “Our Father”: “Thy kingdom come...”

9Do not complain, brothers and sisters, about one another, that you may not be judged. Behold, the Judge is standing before the gates. Leave justice in God’s hands, for he is the judge at the gate who both saves and punishes.⁶

10Take as an example of hardship and patience, brothers and sisters, the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Many of the prophets did not live to see their prophecies fulfilled and their patient endurance is an example for us to imitate.¹ This is also suggestive of the beatitude in Matthew 5:11: “Blest are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of slander against you because of me. Be glad and rejoice, for your reward is great in heaven; they persecuted the prophets before you in the very same way.”

Matthew 11:2-11

In this episode, Jesus comments on his role as Messiah to messengers sent by John the Baptist and on the role of John the Baptist to the crowds who assemble to hear him.¹⁵

2When John the Baptist heard in prison Herod of Antipas of Galilee had paid a visit to his brother in Rome. During that visit he seduced his brother’s wife. He came home again, and dismissed his own wife and married the sister-in-law whom he had lured away from her husband. Publicly and sternly John rebuked Herod. As a result, John was thrown into the dungeons of the fortress of Machaerus down in the mountains near the Dead Sea.¹⁸ **of the works of the Christ,** Jesus performed deeds in Galilee that were expected of the Messiah and his works stirred up such great public interest that John heard about this ministry even in prison.⁹ **he sent his disciples to Jesus with this question,**

3“Are you the one who is to come, The “one who is to come” was a title for the expected Messiah.¹¹ or should we look for another?” John knew that Jesus was the Messiah but he sent his disciples to Jesus so that they could shed their mistaken notions about the kind of Messiah to expect, and come to recognize Jesus.¹⁰ The disciples of John became the core of Jesus’ followers. C. Bernard Ruffin says “Both Peter and Andrew, as well as the sons of Zebedee, were evidently disciples of the prophet known to history as John the Baptist.”¹³ Another view of this passage is that John had prophesied that the Coming One would be an instrument of judgment as well as compassion. But in prison he had heard nothing of judgment, only of compassionate miracles. His question thus arises from lacking insight into a first coming in mercy and a second coming for judgment.¹⁹

4Jesus said to them in reply, “Go and tell John what you hear and see:

5the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers were cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them. Jesus’ answer proves his messianic identity by listing the Messiah’s deeds in terms of Isaiah’s prophecies.¹¹ However, his answer avoids mentioning the Messianic sign of “proclaiming liberty to the captives” (Isaiah 61:1). Jesus seems to be saying delicately that even though he is the Messiah, John will not be set free.¹⁹

6And blessed is the one who takes no offense at me. Jesus here corrects the mistaken idea, which many Jews had of the Messiah, casting him in the role of a powerful earthly ruler—a far cry from the humble attitude of Jesus. It is not surprising that he was a stumbling block to Jews!¹⁰ Let us also consider that while his miracles strengthened the faith of those who witnessed them and also bore witness to the fact that he is the Son of God, his miracles can also be occasions for “offense” as they are not intended to satisfy people’s curiosity or desire for magic. Despite his evident miracles some people reject Jesus and he is even accused of acting by the power of demons.¹²

7As they were going off, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John, “What did you go out to the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? Reeds are flexible but John was not swayed by earthly comforts nor was he diverted from the path of discipline.⁹

8Then what did you go out to see? Someone dressed in fine clothing? Those who wear fine clothing are in royal palaces.

9Then why did you go out? To see a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.

10This is the one about whom it is written: Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you; he will prepare your way before you. John the Baptist’s ministry recalls this line from Malachi whose prophecies associate the Lord’s forerunner with Elijah, the great prophet of the OT. Jesus views John as this prophet who preaches repentance to Israel in the “spirit” of Elijah and offers God’s faithful remnant a final opportunity for salvation. Even John’s clothing recalls Elijah’s distinctive dress.⁹

11“Amen, This is a word that with special solemnity says, “LISTEN!” I say to you, among those born of women there has been none greater than John the Baptist; By implication, John is greater even than Moses!⁵ yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” St. John the Baptist was the greatest in the sense that he had received a mission unique and incomparable in the context of the Old Testament. However, in the Kingdom of heaven (the New Testament) inaugurated by Christ, the divine gift of grace makes the least of those who faithfully receive it greater than the greatest in the earlier dispensation. Once the work of our redemption is accomplished, God’s grace will also be extended to the just of the Old Alliance. Thus, the greatness of John the Baptist, the Precursor and the last of the prophets, will be enhanced by the dignity of being made a son of God.¹⁰

Some of the material for this commentary was taken from the following sources: (1) “Workbook for lectors and gospel readers: 1999” by Lawrence E. Mick, (2) “Workbook for lectors and gospel readers: 2005” by Martin Connell, (3) “Dictionary of the Bible” by John L. McKenzie, S.J., (4) “The Book Of Isaiah Chapters 1-39” by M. McNamara, M.S.C., (5) “The Jerome Biblical Commentary,” (6)

“The Collegeville Bible Commentary: James” by Jerome H. Neyrey, S.J., (7) “Workbook for lectors and gospel readers: 2002” by Aelred R. Rosser, (8) “The Value of Suffering” by Fr. Edgardo M. Arellano, (9) “Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew” With Introduction, Commentary, and Notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, (10) “The Navarre Bible: St. Matthew.” (11) “The Collegeville Bible Commentary: Matthew” by Daniel J. Harrington, S.J. (12) “The Catechism of the Catholic Church,” (13) “The Twelve: The Lives of the Apostles After Calvary” by C. Bernard Ruffin, (14) “The Navarre Bible: Major Prophets”, (15) “Commentary Notes of Sean Innerst and Tim Gray”, (16) “Workbook For Lectors And Gospel Readers: 1990” by Graziano Marcheschi with Nancy Seitz Marcheschi, (17) “The New American Bible: Saint Joseph Edition”, (18) “The Gospel Of Matthew” by William Barclay, and (19) “Jewish New Testament Commentary” by David H. Stern.

In loving memory of Peg Schneller, who originally compiled these commentaries.