

3rd Sunday of Advent, December 13th, 2020

O Lord, I beg Your mercy and Your vindication! Do not call me in vain. Allow me to be a lamp in whom Your light can shine.

Isaiah 61:1-2a, 10-11

1The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners,

2ato announce a year of favor from the Lord and a day of vindication by our God. The prophet was speaking about himself and also about the coming Messiah. When Jesus began his ministry in Galilee, he read this selection in the synagogue and applied it to himself as a fulfillment of this prophecy which was understood by the Jews to be a reference to the awaited “Messiah” (which means “Anointed.”) These “glad tidings” were especially exciting to them because they believed that the Davidic line had disappeared from view from the time of Zedekiah, the last king to rule in Jerusalem even though they clung to God’s promise that the Davidic king would rise to vindicate Israel. “Spirit” always signals a stupendous work of God in biblical tradition. “Anointed” means that he has received an interior message from God and the strength to follow it. (When has the spirit of the Lord been upon you?). “Glad tidings” is the same Greek word that is used for “gospel” in the New Testament. The “lowly” are those who have a poor and lowly spirit, who are anxiously looking to God for life, peace and joy. “Release to prisoners” means that they are led out of dark dungeons into full daylight. “Release” can also be translated as “light.” This is a metaphor for the basic idea that looks to the total salvation of God’s people: bodily, spiritually, individually, and socially.

“Year of favor:” Every 50 years they had a year of Jubilee in which all land reverted to the original owner. The land was more rented than purchased because all land belonged to Yahweh. No one person or family could accumulate large holdings. It was social justice in action. Everyone shared God’s gifts. The “year of favor” was thus a promise of justice and blessing. In practical terms for the people to whom Isaiah was speaking, it was a year of rest between the return from exile and the rebuilding. “Day of vindication” means a day when God will repair or rescue his people.

10I rejoice heartily in the Lord, in my God is the joy of my soul; for he has clothed me with a robe of salvation and wrapped me in a mantle of justice, like a bridegroom adorned with a diadem, like a bride bedecked with her jewels. This is Jerusalem speaking! It is a joyful response to the message proclaimed above. The people are back from exile just as Isaiah had prophesied, even though the rebuilding is a huge task. The Lord God is upon him again and that is good news! Then, like a married couple in tough times, he reminds them of their wedding day. They have a covenant! They have a God! They have joy! Note the similarity to the Magnificat.

11As the earth brings forth its plants, and a garden makes its growth spring up, so will the Lord God make justice and praise spring up before all the nations. Just as nature brings forth its promise, so God is bringing forth the saving act he has begun. In the third week of Advent the promised fulfillment is near and we feel an anticipatory joy in its coming fulfillment.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Brothers and sisters:

16 Rejoice always. “Rejoice always” describes the attitude of the liturgy for this Sunday where our hearts are lifted by the nearness of the Lord’s coming both through the liturgy where we celebrate the coming of the Christ Child and through our anticipation of the Second Coming of Christ which is nearer today than ever before! The Shepherd of Hermas who wrote in the second century commented: “Why does the prayer of the melancholy man not reach up to the altar of God?... Because supplication mixed with melancholy is prevented from ascending pure to the altar. Just as wine mixed with vinegar has no longer the same flavor.”

17 Pray without ceasing. To “pray without ceasing” means to live in the presence of God. The Morning Offering is a great aid as are habitual times of prayer interspersed throughout the day. Remember that Christ is glorified by what we ask the Father in his name. Note that we have NOT BEEN COMMANDED to work, to keep watch and to fast constantly, but to PRAY always. This fervor can come only from love. This scripture gives us three facts to consider: 1) It is always possible to pray. 2) Prayer is a vital necessity. 3) Prayer and Christian life are inseparable. (CCC 2742-2745.)

18 In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus. We owe a debt of gratitude for life, for the gifts we have received, for the fruits of the Redemption. As J. Escriva says, “If things go well, let us rejoice, blessing God who makes them prosper. And if they go badly? Let us rejoice, blessing God who allows us to share in the sweetness of his Cross.”

19 Do not quench the Spirit. The way we “quench the Spirit” is when we rebel. It is not just sin but a hardening of the heart. Prophecy should be held in special regard. New Testament prophets are those who have been given special graces to encourage, console, correct or instruct others. They call us to holiness.

20 Do not despise prophetic utterances.

21 Test everything; retain what is good. This verse refers directly to the discernment of charisms but it can also be taken as advice to reflect prudently before making any decision.

22 Refrain from every kind of evil. This involves the testing of spirits and not just encouragement to be morally good.

23 May the God of peace make you perfectly holy and may you entirely, spirit, soul and body, be preserved blameless for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our holiness is not only the WILL of God, but also the WORK of God plus our cooperation.

24 The one who calls you is faithful, and he will also accomplish it.

This whole letter is about the Second Coming and Paul advises the people to conduct themselves in this ongoing way as they await the day for if they rejoice always, the church will be happy. If they pray without ceasing, the church will be prayerful. If they give constant thanks, the church will be thankful. Christianity is not just a series of obligations, but rather, a way of life oriented to God in joy, prayer and thanksgiving. God’s call to us is a permanent attitude, not a single event, for he is continually calling us to be holy.

John 1:6-8, 19-28

6 A man named John was sent from God. For 400 years there had not been a prophet and then along came John. We call him “John the Baptist” but we might have called him, “John the

Witness.” In the Greek, the word for “witness” is “martur” from which we get the word, “martyr.” John was a witness by his testimony during his life and a witness or martyr by the testimony of his death. He was sent BY GOD.

⁷He came for testimony, to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He came to testify to the “light” which is Jesus. The opposite of the “light” is the “darkness” of sorrow, guilt, fear and sin. It is all that is opposed to God.

⁸He was not the light, but came to testify to the light.

¹⁹And this is the testimony of John. When the Jews from Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to him to ask him, “Who are you?” He admitted, and did not deny it, The “Jews” meant the leadership of Judaism in Jerusalem who turned out to be hostile to Jesus. The “priests and Levites” were those empowered under the law to make religious decisions. This was an official delegation. Remember that John was the son of a Priest, Zechariah, who was serving in the temple when the angel Gabriel announced that Elizabeth would bear him a son whom they were to name “John.”

²⁰but admitted, “I am not the Christ.” John’s clarification of his relationship to Christ is significant because some of his followers had not yet switched over to following Jesus.

²¹So they asked him, “What are you then? Are you Elijah?” And he said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” He answered, “No.” Later in this gospel, Jesus will answer the question, “Who are you?” with the words: “I AM” (8:27) that remind us of God speaking to Moses: “I Am Who Am.” John the Baptist is particularly clear in saying that “I am NOT.” It was a Jewish belief that the prophet Elijah, who had been taken up to heaven in a chariot, would come back to earth to take a part in the establishment of God’s kingdom. In Matthew, Jesus states that the Baptist has fulfilled this mission of Elijah. It was believed that an individual prophet like Moses and promised by Moses would appear to play a role in the establishment of the Messianic kingdom.

²²So they said to him, “Who are you, so we can give an answer to those who sent us? What do you have to say for yourself?”

²³He said: “I am ‘the voice of one crying out in the desert, make straight the way of the Lord,’ as Isaiah the prophet said.” Our notes last week covered this section from Isaiah.

²⁴Some Pharisees were also sent. The Pharisees were particularly watchful over traditional Jewish law and practice and they were concerned about the significance of the baptism practiced by John.

²⁵The asked him, “Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ or Elijah or the Prophet?”

²⁶John answered them, “I baptize with water; but there is one among you whom you do not recognize, The Israelites weren’t normally baptized, only those joining them. They did have a rite of immersion that was used as a legal purification of those who had contracted some impurity under the Law. John was essentially saying that even the Jews needed cleansing.

²⁷the one who is coming after me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to untie.”

²⁸This happened in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

Some of the material for this commentary was taken from “Manners and Customs of Bible Lands” by Fred H. Wight, The Jerome Biblical Commentary, “The Workbook for Lectors and Gospel Readers, 1997,” by Lawrence E. Mick, Notes of Tim Grey, “The Catechism of the Catholic Church” and The Navarre Bible: “Thessalonians And Pastoral Epistles,” and “St. John.”

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