

This Sunday's Readings – the 2nd Sunday of Advent – As with last Sunday, we continue with the themes of watchfulness, preparedness, and anticipation.

The first reading is from Chapter 11 (The Rule of Immanuel) from the Book of the prophet Isaiah (1st Isaiah). This reading is divided into 4 parts. The first part describes the Messiah's ancestry. He will be a descendent of Jesse, King David's father and "the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him". The second section describes the Messiah's rule. He will rule with justice over all the peoples of the world, whether they be rich or poor, powerful or weak. The third section describes the peace and harmony of the world ruled by the Messiah. This is one of the most beautiful and poetic verses in the bible. It uses animal enemies to describe this peace. Of course this cannot be taken literally but was meant to project a picture of peace and justice. The fourth section begins with the same words as the first section – "On that day". It is a message of anticipation. The Messiah (the root of Jesse) will be sought out by all nations including the Gentiles. Fr. Roger Karban in his 2001 syndicated column adds this comment on today's first reading – "Isaiah, for instance, prophecies to a war-weary community (Is 11: 1-10). The Assyrian army constantly threatens the country, creating a sense of insecurity and helplessness for its people. Since they're governed by Davidic kings, Isaiah sculpts an image of an idyllic descendent of David's father, Jesse, ruling over an idyllic period of history. This is how the prophet conceives of Yahweh setting foot in his specific history. Notice how every good thing Isaiah predicts is rooted in a change of relationship. The transformation begins with the ideal king's relationship with Yahweh, progresses to his relationship with his people, and even reaches down to the relationship among animals and their relationship with us. Yahweh eventually sums up the changes by promising, "There shall be no harm or ruin on all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of Yahweh as water covers the sea." In the Semitic mind, "knowledge" is more than just an intellectual tie-in with someone or something. It presumes one has actually experienced the person or thing one knows. In the case of men and women, "knowing" implies they've been sexually intimate, as when Mary asks the angel, "How can this be, since I do not know man?" In the case of our relationship with God, it implies we're aware of His presence in our midst. Isaiah believes if and when Jewish kings "know" Yahweh, the whole country will be secure, no matter what happens to its inhabitants".

The Gospel reading is from Matthew, who introduces us to John the Baptist. It is interesting to note that the 2nd Sunday of Advent always introduces John the Baptist in all three liturgical cycles (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). Some scripture scholars believe that this was initially the beginning of the Gospel of Matthew just like Mark and John and that the infancy narrative was added later. John the Baptist is, to say the least, a very interesting and austere character. Unlike Luke (chapter 1), Matthew tells us nothing about John's origin and the fact that he was a cousin of Jesus. It is believed by some that John was an Essene, one of three Jewish sects. The other two were the Pharisees and the Sadducees. He proclaims a baptism of repentance in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. Matthew's quote from Isaiah 40: 3-4 validates John's mission. John is "a voice of one crying out in the desert: prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths". John baptized with water, which at the time was a form of ritual washing practiced in Palestine between 150 BC and 250 AD. What is unique here is that in ritual washing, the

penitent washes himself, but here, John is doing the washing. It should also be noted that John's baptism does not wash away sins. Here, it is a symbol of repentance. The Messiah, who John says he is "not worthy to carry his sandals", will baptize with "the Holy Spirit and fire". Note how hard John is on the religious leaders, because they not only failed to prepare the people for the coming Messiah but failed to recognize Him when He did come. Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* adds this comment on the incarnation – "When New Testament scholars speak about the incarnation, however, they tend to think of it in somewhat wider terms than popular piety or even dogmatic theology does. The incarnation, from the biblical perspective, is the whole "Christ-event," the total coming of the Son of God in the flesh, which includes not only his nativity but also his whole ministry, his death, resurrection, and ascension. In fact, most of the New Testament, aside from the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke, can proclaim the Christ-event without speaking of the nativity at all. So when the Advent season prepares for the "advent" of Christ, this is not just his nativity but rather his total coming. The nativity is merely one way of speaking of the advent of Christ, and not the central one at that. Hence, it is wholly appropriate that John the Baptist should figure prominently in the Advent season as a herald of the Messiah's coming".

John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A* adds these comments on John the Baptist – "The word *baptism*, which is transliterated directly from the Greek, actually means "dipping in a liquid." In Mediterranean antiquity, water, fire, and wind (or spirit) were viewed as liquids that could be poured upon or into people.

JOHN'S AUDIENCE

"Groups" came to John (from Jerusalem, all Judea, the Jordan region, v. 5) because in antiquity only group travel was safe. Ideal travel was with kin and fictive kin. Moreover, travel in antiquity was considered deviant behavior unless one had a specific reason like pilgrimage or coming out to hear a prophet. Of course John summoned individuals to repentance, but he lumped them into groups, as we shall see.

JOHN'S PURPOSE

By word and symbol, John preaches repentance, particularly group repentance, namely, the reform of Israel (see v. 2). John's garb (camel's-hair clothing cinched with a leather belt) and food (locusts and honey) symbolically link him with Samson, Samuel, and Elijah, who represent the Old Testament tradition of resistance to injustice and the revolutionary model of renewing society. John's preaching challenges various groups to reform. Clearly the prophet and his sympathetic listeners are dissatisfied with the status quo. In the life of Jesus, the transfiguration and resurrection should also be viewed as symbols of transformation calling for conversion, repentance, reform, social change, revolution, and radical transformation of the human condition.

NAME CALLING

At a very obvious level, John challenges elites to reform their lives. The basic claim to honor in a society whose core values are honor and shame is made through birth. One is born into an honorable status, whatever it may be. Imagine the impact of John the Dipper

publicly and loudly calling the “honorable” Pharisees and Sadducees “snake-bastards”! The phrase “brood of vipers” attributes their paternity to snakes rather than humans and directly challenges their basic claim to honor!

DIVIDED SOCIETY

On a less obvious level, John challenges the priestly aristocracy. While many have thought that Judean society in first century Palestine was divided between priests versus people as a whole, the division was actually more between high priesthood (the Jerusalem elite) and the people and their ordinary priests (like Zechariah, the father of John) living in the outlying villages. The oppression worked upon the people and their ordinary priests by the Jerusalem elite and their Roman patrons was experienced in exorbitant taxes, confiscation of ancestral property, and chronic shortages of food, among other things. This contributed much to social unrest and desire for change. John’s priestly descent from an ordinary priest gave him firsthand experience of the problem. It very likely inspired and shaped his prophetic preaching.

FINAL WORD

John the Dipper concluded his preaching with a play on the symbolism of liquids (water, fire, wind-spirit). His symbolic dipping of repentant Israelites in warm water will be replaced with a judgmental dipping by “him who is to come” in the liquid of “holy wind or spirit” and fire. Now is the time for listeners to repent and escape the judgment. For modern American believers, Advent often means commemorating the birth of the baby Jesus and preparing to celebrate Christmas in the grand tradition of charity to the needy and gift giving. The intensely political coloring of the Baptist’s activity should give modern believers pause. Have we diluted his challenge?”

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