

3rd Sunday of Advent B

First Reading Isaiah 61:1-2.10-11

The spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to bind up hearts that are broken; to proclaim liberty to captives, freedom to those in prison; to proclaim a year of favour from the Lord. "I exult for joy in the Lord, my soul rejoices in my God, for he has clothed me in the garments of salvation, he has wrapped me in the cloak of integrity, like a bridegroom wearing his wreath, like a bride adorned in her jewels.

For as the earth makes fresh things grow, as a garden makes seeds spring up, so will the Lord make both integrity and praise spring up in the sight of the nations."

Second Reading 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Be happy at all times; pray constantly; and for all things give thanks to God, because this is what God expects you to do in Christ Jesus. Never try to suppress the Spirit or treat the gift of prophecy with contempt; think before you do anything – hold on to what is good and avoid every form of evil.

May the God of peace make you perfect and holy; and may you all be kept safe and blameless, spirit, soul and body, for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. God has called you and he will not fail you.

Gospel John 1:6-8.19-28

A man came, sent by God. His name was John. He came as a witness, as a witness to speak for the light, so that everyone might believe through him. He was not the light, only a witness to speak for the light. This is how John appeared as a witness. When the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" he not only declared, but he declared quite openly, "I am not the Christ." "Well then," they asked "are you Elijah?" "I am not" he said. "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No." So they said to him, "Who are you? We must take back an answer to those who sent us.

What have you to say about yourself?" So John said, "I am, as Isaiah prophesied: a voice that cries in the wilderness: Make a straight way for the Lord." Now these men had been sent by the Pharisees, and they put this further question to him, "Why are you baptising if you are not the Christ, and not Elijah, and not the prophet?" John replied, "I baptise with water; but there stands among you – unknown to you – the one who is coming after me; and I am not fit to undo his sandal-strap." This happened at Bethany, on the far side of the Jordan, where John was baptising.

Meditation

We can understand why a commission of inquiry was sent to the Baptist. Some Jerusalem theologians expected a Messiah who would confer a baptism through which the Spirit would be poured out. Here is John, north of the Dead Sea, near the spot where Israel once crossed the Jordan to enter the Promised Land. He is conferring a water baptism, which signifies an acceptance of the call to repentance.

Who then is this man who has the crowds running to him and who makes the great cry of the prophets ring out once more after three centuries of silence? John's reply to the commission is surprising in its humility. No, he is not the Messiah. He is not Elijah returned nor the great prophet that is awaited.

This wholly negative statement of his identity must have left the inquirers dissatisfied. It is preserved in the New Testament because some of his followers preached a baptism which competed with that of the primitive Church. He declared himself to be only the precursor, a simple witness, a lamp lit by God for his Christ, the voice of the Word. We must also recognize our role as "Christ-bearers", called to refer by our very lives to Jesus. This humble and self-effacing role is in no way a negligible one.

It is no small thing to ask us to prepare others' road to the Lord.