

THE EMMAUS SERIES

3rd Sunday of Advent, Year B

Isaiah 61:1-2, 10-11

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8, 19-28

He has sent me to bring good news to the poor

Genuine Christian faith does not make us long-faced; it should make us enthusiastic and happy. Even in Lent, the most serious season of the Church's year, the Sunday at the midpoint of the journey to Easter has a theme of rejoicing. In the same way, on this third Sunday of Advent, our liturgy takes up a joyous theme.

In our first reading, from Isaiah, the prophet is filled with joy. He has the anointing of the Spirit to bring, in the name of God, 'good news' of encouragement, healing, freedom, and an outpouring of God's special favour. This message is especially for 'the poor' – those who have no security except in God. Originally addressed to God's people in their exile – this proclamation was read by Jesus in the synagogue of Nazareth. And he added, 'This text is being fulfilled today, even as you listen'. As the text continues, the prophet 'exults for joy', using marriage themes to express the covenant bond of love between the chosen people and their God; and he looks forward to their renewed life becoming an inspiration to all the nations of the world.

The second reading from 1 Thessalonians – the earliest writing of the Christian Scriptures – is chosen for our Advent liturgy, no doubt, because it rises to a climax with its reference to 'the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ'. But it is a good choice, because it takes up today's theme of joy. Paul's reference to those things that unite that early Christian community provides a useful check list as we evaluate the life of our own communities: 'constant prayer', thankfulness to the Father, offered in and through Christ; an openness to the promptings of the Spirit that comes through members who are in tune with God's ways ('the gift of prophecy'); and the 'peace' that is the fruit of all these shared blessings. True joy comes with the experience of what we are made for; the joy brought by Christian faith, the joy all true believers have experienced, the joy that only God can give, comes through the things Paul speaks of.

John the Baptist is again our Advent guide, in today's gospel reading from John. Because he has revived the ways of Israel's prophets he has caused quite a stir, and the authorities of Jerusalem send interrogators who ask him to give an account of himself. His selfless response is disarmingly frank: he is not the messiah; he is not one of the old prophets come back to life; he is not the New Moses of Israel's expectations. His role is that of a herald, 'a voice crying in the wilderness', that announces one who stands among the crowd, still 'unknown' to them. The description of his witness in this passage leaves his hearers hungry to know more of the one to whom this great figure shows such reverence – a prelude to a great theme of John's gospel, 'the true light' that is going to transform a darkened world.

Today's liturgy can serve to remind us of today's call to a 'New Evangelisation' – bringing the true joy of the light of Christ to a world in which there is so much darkness and pain. When the task seems beyond us, let us remember with the old prophet, that we are working for God's future; let us understand with Paul that it is first and foremost the quality of our lives together that will bring people to share our faith; and let us learn from the Baptist that the effectiveness of our outreach will depend upon the unselfish commitment we have made to the Saviour and what he stands for.

John Thornhill sm