

THE EMMAUS SERIES

2nd Sunday of Advent, Year C

Baruch 5:1-9

Philippians 1:3-6, 8-11

Luke 3:1-6

All humanity will see the salvation of God

Last Sunday, the liturgy invited us to see Advent as a time of preparation for the Saviour's birth, the dawn of salvation. Today we take up this theme again, in the gospel reading from Luke. John the Baptist is a prominent figure in the liturgies of Advent. After a long period in which the voice of the prophets was not heard, the Lord's Precursor – praised by Jesus as 'more than a prophet' (Mt 11:9) – made his appearance. Luke's introducing of John is dramatic and skilful. Situating John's heralding in the midst of the real world's history, he names contemporaries who foreshadow the tragic conflict that is soon to be enacted – Pilate who will authorize Christ's death, the petty rulers of the nation under occupation, the high priests whose hostility seals the fate of Jesus. But the gloom of this introduction gives way immediately to the vision of hope and promise that inspired John's mission. The Baptist – remembered as a man of the desert – is presented as inaugurating a new Exodus for God's people, as foretold by the prophet Isaiah.

Because the first Exodus from Egypt was the defining moment in the destiny of the Chosen People, it is not surprising that old Israel sometimes looked forward to the final fulfilment of God's promises as a kind of new Exodus. Our first reading, from the prophet Baruch, takes up this theme – making part of today's liturgy, not only because it echoes the words of Isaiah, describing the making of a way through mountains and valleys 'so that Israel may walk in safety', but also because its message of hope is admirably suited to the mood of our Advent liturgies. Looking back on the return from the Babylonian captivity as a second Exodus, the prophet looks forward to God's final intervention on behalf of his people as a last great Exodus. It is an outstanding example of the boundless hopes of those among the Chosen People who were faithful to their Jewish faith, looking forward to the coming of the messiah, in the last years of Old Testament times. When God remembers his promises, and Jerusalem's children are reassembled, they will discard their mourning garments and 'put on the beauty of the glory of God forever'; God will make them a sign for 'every nation under heaven'; God will give them a new name, 'Peace through integrity'. We are challenged in this time of renewal, to match this remarkable faith and hope.

Last week, we saw how – as 'the Son of Man' foretold in the prophecy of Daniel – Jesus presented himself as the fulfilment of Israel's boundless hopes. In today's second reading, from Paul's letter to the Philippians, we see how this truth has become part of the faith of the first Christian Church. One of the principal themes of the prophets of old Israel, as they warned a wayward people to amend their ways, was the 'Day of the Lord', when all must face the judgment of God. Paul now takes up this old theme – but for him it is 'the Day of Christ Jesus', when the Saviour will return as Son of Man to be our Judge. Though it is a season of hope and joy, Advent is also a time in which we are called to a deeper conversion.

John Thornhill sm