

ADVENT 2020

REFLECTIONS

St Andrew, Apostle

Monday 30th November

Romans 10:9-18

Faith comes from what is preached and what is preached comes from the Word of Christ.

TODAY'S First Reading is taken from a discussion by St Paul of whether Israelites, relying on the Jewish Law, can be saved. His view is that everyone – Jew and Gentile – needs only call upon the name of the Lord to be saved. The name of the Lord, for St Paul, is of course 'Jesus'. Separated from its context in that particular discussion, the passage is essentially about the apostolic commission to preach. This is the particular vocation of an apostle – amongst whom St Andrew was the *Protokletos* ('First Called'). St Andrew's greatness was that he effectively evangelised Simon Peter his brother. He didn't persuade him, as far as we know, but ushered him into Jesus' presence. This, for us, is a model of evangelism. It is a work of sowing and not of reaping. We broadcast the seeds which others cause to grow. The apostolic ministry is a matter of tradition: A hands on to B who hands on to C. And there is, if you like, a variable evangelistic 'R number'. So, instead of A handing on to B, we have A handing on to B and C, who hand it on to D, E, F, and G. This exponential growth explains the formidable success of the Early Church and the continuing success of the Church nowadays in various parts of the world.

Tuesday in the First Week of Advent

1st December

St Edmund Campion, Martyr

Isaiah 11:1-10

The Peaceful Kingdom

READING Isaiah is a traditional Advent task in many lectionaries. Some work their way through some of it in *lectio continua*, one chapter leading to another. Our weekday Mass lectionary stays with Isaiah until 16th December, after which we are in the direct lead-up to Christmas. Obviously, having 66 chapters, the book of the prophet Isaiah is too long to read in its entirety and the Mass lectionary unsurprisingly chooses 'purple passages', passages which speak particularly of the dawning of the Light, the coming of the longed-for Messiah. In chapter 11 we have a vision of the peaceful kingdom where, under the benign reign of the Messiah, creation is restored to harmony. The wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the kid, the calf, the lion and the fatling, all peacefully co-exist, and the lion makes do with straw, like the ox. In this paradisaical vision, the leader is a little child, and neither asp nor adder harm children. We notice the savage contrast provided today by the cruel execution of St Edmund Campion and we notice also, in passing, that the pouring out of the Spirit upon the Lord's Anointed is the substance of the prayer used at Confirmation, when the candidates receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Wednesday in the First Week of Advent

2nd December

Isaiah 25:6-10

The Feast on the Holy Mountain

THE VISION of the day of the Lord and the feast on the Holy Mountain paints a picture starkly contrasting with the subsistence economy in which most people lived in the ancient world. Food was meagre and scarce and the vision of feasting, 'fat things full of marrow, of wine on the lees well refined', would be very enticing. As a sign of God's greatness, this feast is

to be open to people of every nation – the veil having been pulled aside. The day of salvation and the overcoming of death marks the victory of the Hebrew God over the Canaanite god of the underworld, Mot, whose Hebrew name means 'Death'. Overcoming death implies the triumph of fertility and, with it, bountiful harvest. It is in 1 Corinthians 15:54-55 that St Paul takes the phrase 'He will swallow up death for ever' in verse 8 to mean the relevance of the Resurrection to human life. The phrase 'wipe away tears from all faces', also in verse 8, is also used in the Book of Revelation (7:17). Similarly, the feast on the Holy Mountain links us well to the Marriage Feast of the Lamb, the final vision of Heaven in Revelation and the meal of which we receive a foretaste at Mass.

Thursday in the First Week of Advent

3rd December

St Francis Xavier

Isaiah 26:1-6

The Song of the Redeemed

A STRONG biblical theme is the triumph of the weak over the strong. There are many examples: the story of Gideon (Judges 6-8), Sampson (Judges 13-16), David and Goliath (1 Samuel 17), and the Suffering Servant of Isaiah (Isaiah 50, 53). The same principle is at work in the *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55) and indeed in the message of the Crucifixion, the saving work of Christ (1 Corinthians 1:18-25). In today's reading, the prophet is seeing victory for the redeemed, those who trust in the Lord. The walls and gates of Jerusalem, which have kept the enemy out, will securely enclose the faithful. The emphasis is on trust in the Lord: those whose minds are stayed on him will find peace.

Friday 4th December

Isaiah 29:17-24

The Day the eyes of the blind will see

WE ARE in a discussion about Jerusalem's judgment and salvation and we continue to focus on the Day of the Lord, a day when all will be transformed. The deaf will hear and the blind will see, and we are including here both spiritual deafness and spiritual blindness. The meek and the poor will find their joy in the Lord. Some of those who go astray will learn to improve their ways and some of the grumblers will learn to look at things differently. Evil-doers however will have no place. In this company of the redeemed, God's name shall be declared holy and his will shall be done. We are seeing here not only wholesale moral and spiritual improvement but an end to economic injustice and misery.

Saturday 5th December

Isaiah 30:19-21, 23-26

God will be gracious when he hears your cry

WE CONTINUE with the consideration of Jerusalem's future. What is needed is confidence in the Lord which will lead to a fertility previously unknown. Confidence requires obedience to the Lord's teaching, but such faithfulness brings great rewards. We are talking the language of apocalyptic: there is defeat for Jerusalem's enemies – 'the great slaughter' – and a great increase in the light. The moon will be as bright as the sun and the sun's light will increase sevenfold.

Monday in the Second Week of Advent

7th December

(St Ambrose, Bishop and Doctor of the Church)

Isaiah 35:1-10

The Return of the Redeemed to Zion

TODAY'S First Reading speaks of the transformation of the desert from a wilderness into fertile ground. We can imagine the dependency on water of a people whose land had no extensive river system. Drought was a constant threat. The joy of Zion as a fertile place is portrayed as a place where not only do the flowers bloom but the wild beasts are gone. It becomes a place of peace and plenty. This chapter of Isaiah – chapter 35 – is surrounded by frightening oracles of judgment but seems to lead a few chapters later, chapter 40, to another account of the transformation of desert and the levelling of rough and rugged terrain, preparing a highway for the return of an exiled people from Babylon to Jerusalem. This restoration of the people is a prelude to the coming of the Messiah, the Redeemer of Israel, and a heightening of the sense of expectation.

THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

Tuesday 8th December

Genesis 3:9-15, 20

A Showdown in Paradise

THIS extract from the story of Adam and Eve is not, of course, a historical account but a reflective – and, we believe, inspired – meditation on the origins of the human condition. It is paralleled by other Near Eastern creation myths. How was it that such a sublime creature – man in male and female sexes – came to be limited by suffering and death? How was it that we learnt to make bad choices? Or, as I always say, how was it that, offered a stick of celery or a jam doughnut, we usually opt for the doughnut? In Romans 7:15 St Paul says this:

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

Theologians call this tendency to make wrong, unhealthy, or sinful choices 'concupiscence' and, not only for St Paul but for subsequent theologians – St Augustine of Hippo most notably – this whole notion of human frailty is explained as 'original sin', the sin of Adam who ate the forbidden fruit. What happens when Adam and Eve eat the fruit is that they have the knowledge of good and evil – symbolised by their realisation that they were naked. Once this happens, Adam, Eve, and the serpent are driven out of the Garden of Paradise. Christian thought builds on this 'original sin' of disobedience, seeing its consequences in Adam having to do manual labour, Eve having to endure the labour of childbirth, and the serpent being confined to slithering along on its belly. The serpent as tempter becomes the enemy of the man and the woman and the prophecy is that the man and woman will get the better of the serpent, the serpent being a symbol of evil. Eve herself is subsequently portrayed as the tempter – the woman who led Adam astray. As well as in St Paul, this is found in Jewish thought - see Sirach 25:24:

**From a woman sin had its beginning,
and because of her we all die.**

All this is reflected upon in Christian devotion and spiritual writing but, for today at least – the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady – we focus on the last verse of the reading:

**The man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the
mother of all living.**

It follows, poetically at least, that if, as St Paul maintains, Christ is the New Adam – the 'Second Adam to the Fight' as St John Henry Newman put it - then Mary is the New Eve. The mediævals well understood this, and, as the fifteenth century carol 'Adam lay y-bounden' puts it:.

**Ne hadde the appil take ben,
the appil taken ben,**

**Ne hadde never our lady
a ben hevene quen.**

Wednesday in the Second Week of Advent

9th December

Isaiah 40:25-31

The Lord gives strength to the weary.

TWO DAYS ago, we had the passage from Isaiah 35 about the wilderness being turned into a fertile land and we linked it with Isaiah 40, the beginning of an entirely new section, sometimes referred to as 'Deutero-Isaiah', 'Second Isaiah'. Yesterday's feast, the Immaculate Conception, interrupted the *lectio continua* and so we found ourselves missing out that memorable passage, famous from Handel's *Messiah* as the aria 'Comfort ye my people'. It was read last Sunday however. Today's passage – from later on in chapter 40 – sets out the implications of a glorious future for God's people and for Jerusalem. This it does not by spelling the future out more but by enlarging our vision of God. God is no longer seen as the God of Israel and the God of Judah, the God of two kingdoms, north and south, but as

the everlasting God

the Creator of the ends of the earth (v28)

This is how the spiritual relevance of Second Isaiah links with our understanding. We are dealing not only with the God of the Hebrews but with the God of the whole universe, the God and Father of us all, and the promise to all believers is that:

**they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.** (v31)

Thursday in the Second Week of Advent

10th December

Isaiah 41:13-20

I, the Holy One of Israel, are your Redeemer

YESTERDAY we learnt about the sovereignty of God – he is God of the whole world, of the whole creation, and not a tribal god. But today he tells us that he will nevertheless help his chosen people, and reveals himself as the Redeemer of Israel. 'Redeemer' is a word which occurs several times in this part of Isaiah. It is specially to be noticed when it is linked with the favoured reference to God in Isaiah, 'the Holy One of Israel'. At this stage 'the Redeemer' mostly refers to the fact that God alone can restore the fortunes of a much diminished people. The people will regain their standing among the nations, not through their own strength but because of God's action on their behalf. As we shall see, in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, 'Redeemer' takes on a transformed meaning. Meanwhile to the exiles, the promises of fertility and irrigation are there to reassure them: the help which God has in mind, according to the words of the prophet, is help of a very practical kind. The emphasis on the poor and needy is a striking example of the concern of the Jewish religion for the oppressed and, as we shall experience later in the Christian story, it is the Suffering Servant as portrayed in Isaiah – whether this is a person or a nation or both - that takes centre stage.

Friday in the Second Week of Advent

11th December

Isaiah 48:17-19

If only you had listened.....

WE ARE in the sixth century before Christ. On the one hand we have Cyrus, the first Persian Emperor, about to defeat the Babylonians and liberate the people Israel, held in captivity in Babylon. On the other hand we have the imperative – which is there in the history books of the Hebrew Bible – that freedom, peace, and prosperity would be Israel's, if only she would be obedient to God's commandments. This might not be a new

theme but, in the prophecy of Isaiah, it takes on a new depth. This is not loyalty to a tribal god and the keeping of his rules and regulations. This is discovering what is sometimes called 'ethical monotheism': there is one God, creator all that is, and his commandments are not rules and regulations but deep underlying principles which affect how human beings organise their lives in all places and at all times. This truth is foretold by the prophets and comes to fruition in the coming of the Messiah, the Advent of the Christ.

Monday in the Third Week of Advent

14th December

Numbers 24:2-7, 15-17

A star shall come forth out of Jacob, and a sceptre out of Israel

HAVING spent much of Advent with Isaiah's prophecies featuring as the Old Testament reading, today we begin to explore material in other books relevant to the coming Kingdom of the Messiah. We begin with the Book of Numbers and the strange and primitive story of Balaam (Numbers 22-24). Balaam is a gentile prophet from pre-history: the story of Balaam and his talking donkey is told as a fable in chapter 22. We are now in chapter 24 and back to a more historical mode. Balak the King of Moab is warned by Balaam the prophet that a future ruler of Israel will crush the Moabites. This prophecy will true in the tenth century BC when King David vanquishes Moab and makes it a vassal state. Early Christian writers saw in Balaam's prophecy to Balak a reference to the coming of Christ, especially pertinent because Jesus is seen as King in David's house and lineage.

Tuesday in the Third Week of Advent

15th December

Zephaniah 3:1-2, 9-13

The Wickedness of Jerusalem

ZEPHANIAH, like other prophets, was preaching before the fall of Jerusalem and the Babylonian captivity – so before 587 BC. He is linked with the reign of King Josiah (640-609 BC) and at the time the Assyrians were the dominant power in the region, though their power was declining. Zephaniah's proclamations are full of metaphors and similes and his reproaches in chapter 3 are directed towards Judah and the wickedness of Jerusalem. The prophet concludes by suggesting that in the end there will be a faithful remnant, a holy people. This notion of a faithful remnant is a strong theme in the prophetic literature and it is later seen by Christians in terms of the Kingdom of God. Those who respond to the call to repentance and the life of the baptised belong to and pray and work for the coming Kingdom, inaugurated by the Messiah.

Wednesday in the Third Week of Advent

16th December

Isaiah 45:6b-8, 18, 21-25

Rorate cœli de super

THE PHRASE *Rorate cœli de super* is hard to render in English. In the translation we use for the Advent Prose it comes out as 'Drop down ye heavens from above'. In today's reading the verse is:

**⁸ Shower, O heavens, from above,
and let the skies rain down righteousness;
let the earth open, that salvation may sprout forth,
and let it cause righteousness to spring up also. (v8)**

A Messianic prophecy which talks about rainfall is a less accessible metaphor for us nowadays, perhaps, than the idea of salvation 'sprouting forth'. In context, whatever the metaphor, the salvation and the

righteousness are the consequence of Cyrus King of Persia defeating the Babylonians and restoring God's people to Jerusalem. And yet, even within the limits of that one historical event, here prophesied, is a much more momentous event, the coming of the Messiah. It's a bit like a prophecy that a child might go on to be Captain of the School only for the child to develop into being winner of a Nobel prize. To be fair, the prophet glimpses the bigger picture and its possibilities because he is envisaging God being worshipped as God throughout the earth, a Saviour for all who turn to him. This is the vocation of Israel to be a light to the nations (Is 42:6; Is 49:6), a theme taken up by Simeon when Jesus is presented in the Temple (Lk 2:32). The Messiah as the glory of Israel and the light to lighten the gentiles is a favourite theme of St Luke who makes reference to the same idea in Acts 13:47 and Acts 26:33. We are looking for a Saviour, a Saviour to whom every knee will bow. (v.23).

O Sapientia [O Wisdom]

O Wisdom, coming forth from the mouth of the Most High, reaching from one end to the other mightily, and sweetly ordering all things: Come and teach us the way of prudence. *Sir 24:3; Wis 8:1*

Thursday 17th December

Genesis 49:2, 8-10

The Sceptre shall not depart from Judah

THE ADVENT Antiphons, sometimes known as 'the Great "O"s', are seven titles of the Messiah, distilled from the Old Testament. He is Adonai, or leader of the House of Israel. He is the Root of Jesse, from which sprung the House of David. He is the Key of David, unlocking the gates of death. He is the Morning Star, heralding the Dawn. He is the King of the Nations and he is Emmanuel, God-with-us. What is striking about all these descriptions is that implicitly they are descriptions of Almighty God. The final one – God-with-us – celebrates the central theological truth for Christians that God in Christ took our flesh and dwelt – or rather 'dwells' – in our midst. In today's first reading, we are right back in pre-history, in the time of the patriarchs. Here Jacob, known as Israel, is saying farewell to his sons. He is dying but not before prophesying the fortunes of Judah. He would have had no way of knowing or guessing that the future of Judah would present himself as the Son of God but he knew that the sceptre of Judah, the symbol of kingship, would be one to whom 'shall be the obedience of the peoples'.

O Adonai

Friday 18th December

O Adonai, and leader of the House of Israel, who appeared to Moses in the fire of the burning bush and gave him the law on Sinai: Come and redeem us with an outstretched arm. *cf Ex 3:2, 24:12*

Jeremiah 23:5-8

The Righteous Branch of David

IN THE seven days leading up to Christmas, one might imagine that the readings would match the Advent Antiphon of the day. The lack of synchronisation is because the Advent Antiphon is used at Vespers, before

and after the *Magnificat*, and Vespers was once the beginning of the Office of the Day. Beginning the day in the evening is the Jewish custom – the Sabbath begins at nightfall on Friday – which is maintained in Catholic liturgy on Sundays and solemnities, which begin the evening before.

Today the Antiphon is *O Adonai* and point us further back to God revealing himself to Moses in the burning bush and on Mount Sinai. The first reading, by contrast, refers us to the Son of David, who saves Judah and Israel, bringing them back from exile back to their own land. This second Exodus – this time not from Egypt but from Babylon – becomes a new and important point of reference, more important, Jeremiah seems to say, than the first Exodus. God the deliverer is described as 'The Lord our Righteousness' (v.6) which is a play on the name Zedekiah, the puppet king who rebelled against the Babylonians, leading to the destruction of Jerusalem.

O Radix [O Root of Jesse]

O Root of Jesse, standing as a sign among the peoples; before you kings will shut their mouths, to you the nations will make their prayer: Come and deliver us, and delay no longer. *cf Is 11:10, 45:14, 52:15; Rom 15:12*

Saturday 19th December

Judges 13:2-7, 24-25

The story of Sampson

AS WE continue to reflect on the way the Hebrew Scriptures point towards the coming of the Messiah, we take in a couple of the heroes of Israelite history. These heroes – Samson today and Samuel on 22nd December – are shadows of what is to come. Samson is the mighty warrior who slays Goliath. Samuel is the great prophet who anoints David as King of Israel. We see the specific – Samson's fight against the Philistines and David's reign over Israel – as pointing towards something more universal. The Messiah – Jesus – will fight against sin and death, and like Samson, lose his life in the process. The Messiah – Jesus – like Samuel will establish a new Kingdom, not in time but in eternity.

O Clavis David [O Key of David]

O Key of David and sceptre of the House of Israel; you open and no one can shut; you shut and no one can open: Come and lead the prisoners from the prison house, those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death.

cf Is 22:22, 42:7

Sunday 20th December

Isaiah 7:10-14

The Virgin is with Child

THE PROPHET is one who sees both the present and the future with a keen and usually uncomfortable eye. In today's reading, Isaiah counsels King Ahaz about the danger of joining a union of small states against the might of Assyria. That coalition, says Isaiah, will fail and, far from preserving Judah's independence, make matters worse. If the prophet's analysis of the present is grim, he nonetheless looks to the future with hope. The prophecy of Emmanuel ('God-with-us') happens three times in Isaiah (7:14; 8:8; 8:10). It is not so much a comfort for present difficulties as the guarantee of a future favourable outcome. Ahaz needs to do nothing to save his nation but have confidence in God's words of assurance. The relevance for us is not only the passage pointing to the birth of the Messiah, as the Church has traditionally interpreted it, but the knowledge that God is with us and will be with us in all circumstances, in all our difficulties.

O Oriens [O Morning Star]

O Morning Star, splendour of light eternal and sun of righteousness: Come and enlighten those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death.

cf Mal 4:2

Monday 21st December

Song of Songs 2:8-14

My beloved comes leaping over the Mountains

SONG OF SONGS means 'the best of all songs'. Sometimes known as 'The Song of Solomon', because the book is dedicated to Solomon, we are here looking at something from the Wisdom literature in the Hebrew Bible. We can only guess when the book was written and can only marvel at its poetry. It is always a surprise to discover that it is the one book in the Bible that makes no mention of God. The characters seem to be the Man, the Woman, and the Daughters of Jerusalem – and that is made clear in the different Hebrew verb forms. Jewish tradition has always associated this love song as an allegory of the love of God and the covenant people, Israel. Christian thought re-interprets that as the love of God and the Church, the New Israel. Today's reading is a description of the delight of lovers in Springtime and, as Christmas approaches, we look forward to celebrating afresh the outpouring of God's love for us in Christ.

O Rex Gentium

Tuesday 22nd December

O King of the nations, and their desire, the cornerstone making both one:
Come and save the human race, which you fashioned from clay.

cf Is 28:16; Eph 2:14

Luke 1:46-56

Mary's Song of Praise

THE MAGNIFICAT, as this Gospel passage from St Luke is called, is a hymn from the mouth of Mary when she visited her cousin Elizabeth. At the time, Elizabeth was six months' pregnant with the son of her old age, John later called 'the Baptist'. Mary's canticle is based on the Song of Hannah, the mother of the Old Testament prophet, Samuel, (1 Sam 2:1-10), but greatly enriched by other biblical allusions, such as the use of phrases from the Psalms. It was customary for Hellenistic historians to use speeches to summarise conversations and events and St Luke shows himself to be such an historian. The importance of the *Magnificat* is that it is a prospectus for the coming Kingdom of God, in which values are turned upside down. This prospectus, together with Our Lady's statement, 'All generations shall call me blessed', is why the canticle forms the climax each day of the Evening Office of Vespers. Mary's words are those of the faithful daughter of Israel. In that sense, she speaks not just for herself but for the whole People of God. God is described in the canticle as 'Lord', 'Saviour', and 'Holy'. Each of these titles has been applied (Luke 1:34, 1:43) or will be applied (2:11) to Jesus. The Child about to be born is indeed Almighty God.

O Emmanuel

O Emmanuel, our king and our lawgiver, the hope of the nations and their Saviour: Come and save us, O Lord our God. *cf Is 7:14*

Wednesday 23rd December

Luke 1:57-66

The Birth of John the Baptist

BEFORE we get to the birth of Jesus, the Infancy Narratives at the beginning of St Luke's Gospel give us the account of the birth and naming of his older cousin, St John the Baptist. The birth of John and Jesus, sixth months apart, are preceded by the announcement of the pregnancy of Elizabeth and Mary. There was the encounter of Zechariah, John's father, with the angel Gabriel in the temple at Jerusalem, at the offering of incense, Zechariah's priestly task. And there was the encounter of Mary with Gabriel at Nazareth, announcing her overshadowing by the Holy Spirit. The difference between these two angelic encounters are significant. One was to an important person, a Jerusalem priest and the other to a girl in an obscure Galilean village. One was to an elderly childless man and the other to a young woman, only just old enough, we presume, for the responsibilities of motherhood. One was to an incredulous man, who was struck dumb by the news. The other was to a young woman, happy to obey and trust even what she could not begin to understand. And so, in the story of the birth of John the Baptist, Zechariah has the opportunity to recover his powers of speech by expressing his faith and confidence in God first writing on a tablet. He and Elizabeth decline to follow tradition and give their son a family name and so name their son John, the name given to them by the angel.

Christmas Eve

Thursday 24th December

Luke 1:67-79

Zechariah's Prophecy

THE THREE passages from St Luke used as canticles or hymns in the Divine Office are *Magnificat* (the Song of Mary) which we encountered on Tuesday 22nd, *Benedictus* (the Song of Zechariah) which we have heard today, and *Nunc Dimittis* (the Song of Simeon) which we shall use at Candlemas (Lk 2:29-32). *Benedictus* is the climax of Lauds, *Magnificat* the climax of Vespers, *Nunc Dimittis* the climax of Compline. These three canticles link the daily prayer of the Church to the Incarnation: God taking our flesh and living in our midst. *Benedictus* takes the form of a traditional Jewish blessing. It begins with God visiting and redeeming Israel, his people. God raises up the horn of salvation to herald the dawning day – the dayspring – from on high, a dawning not of military conquest and political freedom but of a transformation of values, such as was laid out for us in *Magnificat*. This will be heralded by the little child – the infant prophet John the Baptist – who will point to the coming of light, life, and peace.