

Second Sunday of Advent

Is 40:1-5, 9-11; 2Pet 3:8-14; Mark 1:1-8.



The desert, prophetic figures, hope - the courageous leap into the newness of a God who comes (Adventus) all these images/movements permeate the readings today. Is.40:1ff is the beginning of the message of Second Isaiah, the anonymous prophet of exile. Preaching around 540 B.C., he stresses the dimensions of hope and consolation for a depressed people. A new period is about to begin. There will be no more punishment; sin is forgiven. Startling cosmic upheavals are an image of the

Lord as the One who comes in Power. Divine presence as power is not like the gods of this world: Utterly free and beyond human manipulation, to come to know this God can only bring freedom and joy. And one notes here also the origin of 'gospel', 'good news'. When the people of Israel choose to return in hope to their treasure, the true God, all past memories of the Lord's personal care as shepherd rise up to strengthen them.

In Mark 1:1-8 John the Baptist is the prophet of the Coming One. A desert figure, the authenticity of John's call is attested to by the many who come to be baptised by him for repentance and forgiveness of sin. Somewhat eccentrically clad and living on a frugal diet, there is no doubt about the deep religious faith of John whom we know lived out his vocation to the point of martyrdom. Some have seen him simply as a black and white moralist, a rather forbidding figure and therefore the Lord whose way he prepares must be a rather grim God. But Mark, (unlike Mt 3:7f, Lk.3:7ff) does not justify the Baptist's identity by details of ethical preaching. Like Isaiah Is.40:3, John announces the advent of God in the context of the desert, the place of no distraction, conducive to self-questioning and 'turning'. Neither does he presume to describe the Coming One except that he is unworthy to 'undo the strap of his sandals'. In him the Holy Spirit will be manifested. It seems that John is saying that what we wait for in the wilderness of existence is not so much the creation of a better world or a better self, but simply the good news of God as God, in his unique spiritual power, who alone can bring our lives to the perfection we desire.

2 Peter 3:8-14 is a further meditation on this theme. The lead in to the reading shows Peter responding to the 'scoffers', who ridicule the whole idea of the coming of God. 'What has happened to the promise of his coming?' they say. 'Everything is just the same as from the beginning; nothing has happened and nothing will happen. So why hope?' This sounds familiar. It points to the 'scoffer' in all of us, when we reduce God to our level, to the flatness of our desires. But Peter replies that the One who Comes in Power is beyond our understanding, sometimes appearing not to act, and at other times stealing in on us as 'thief'. In Catholic culture the 'thief' image has always been associated with the God-moment, the moment of truth, which is our death, and this we do not deny. But it's interesting to note that Peter startlingly combines 'thief' with apocalyptic transformations and change. Is he saying that while we might set out doggedly in hope to make our puny paths straight for God, that all the time it is God himself who makes his path in us. He is the thief who ransacks the house. If one would prepare an empty place/ In the depth of his soul There can be no doubt that God would fill it at once./ If there were a void on earth/ The heaven would fall to fill it. (Johann Tauler, 14th cent.) . .