

Third Sunday of Advent

Is 61:1-2,10-11. IThess 5:16-24. Jn 1:6-8,19-28.



It is Gaudete Sunday and a spirit of joy characterise the readings. 'The gigantic secret of Christianity', says Chesterton, 'is its joy'. And let us enter into this joy with C.S.Lewis, when musing on the reality of Heaven / God he says he has the impression of a 'sound of a chuckle in the darkness'. The readings today lift us in various ways to this place of letting 'joy size', letting God.

The poor have a near-religious status as God's favoured ones. In Isaiah, the prophetic words are about good news to the poor. (We note here how Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth, Lk 4:14f., applies this reading to himself). But in Isaiah also the truly poor are the joyous ones. Being single-minded and uncluttered they perceive what truly matters. They know their identity is not of their own making. It is constantly being given to them like a seed being nourished freshly every day. Or it is the cloak of integrity which wraps them round, marks them out and draws us to them.

Brief dense phrases give the introduction to the Baptist a poetic ring recalling the august setting of the hymn to the Word as incarnate Son which is the theme tune of the Fourth Gospel. The Baptist, mainly a forerunner and preacher in the other gospels here epitomizes witness. He is not the light but the witness to the light. Confusion as to messianic expectations is reflected in the questions asked of John. These are the questions of officials doing their job, but not really interested in John's answer. Like the biblical poor, John looks beyond himself; he emphasises what he is not rather than what he is. His special witness in Advent is to turn us to Jesus as the Light and meaning of our lives because it is so easy to drift through life with his light 'unknown' to us as it was to John's inquisitors. The psalm focuses on that other key Advent witness, Mary, also the joyous woman of the biblical poor. (The Magnificat is primarily based on the Song of Hanna, mother of Samuel (ISam 2:1-10), who like Mary conceived her child through a special grace of God). In her very 'nothingness', Mary is not threatened by what is being asked of her no matter how strange but rejoices in the unexpectedness of God's ways.

St. Paul's text, proclaiming the very spirit of the readings, links joy with gratitude and praise. Never suppress the Spirit, says St. Paul. We all yearn to be happy and feel good, but the Spirit's fruit of joy (Gal 5: 22) transcends a purely human happiness that is a prey to circumstances. When John speaks of the One whose sandal-strap he is unfit to undo, when Mary raises herself in a song of praise, when Paul simply says 'Be happy at all times', are they not talking of a joyous ability to praise and give thanks at all times, good and bad, because we are learning to live from the glory of who we are in Christ? Illumine me with the true light, O Compassionate One, so that I may see the glory which you had with your Father before the world began.

Symeon the New Theologian.