

3rd Sunday of Advent, December 15, 2019.

REJOICE, THE LORD IS NEAR.

“Say to those whose hearts are frightened: Be strong, fear not! Here is your God, he comes with vindication; with divine recompense, he comes to save you” (Isaiah 35:4).

The message of hope the Lord gives us this Sunday follows the same logic as last Sunday’s message. Remember his words, “A shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse, from his root a bud shall blossom” (Isaiah 11:1). This Sunday, the Lord tells us through the same prophet that “the desert and the parched land will exult; the steppe will rejoice and bloom. They will bloom with abundant flowers, and rejoice with joyful song” (Isaiah 35:1).

In other words, a people considered barren and lifeless like a desert will teem with life and abundant joy. Those who seemed forgotten and dead will see the glory of God and will be superlatively happy. The people of Isaiah’s time were like the desert and land baked by heat, during their period of exile in Babylon.

That, however, was not the end of the road for them. For the down fall of a man is not the end of his life.

The Lord has a plan of a glorious future for his people. This rings loud and clear in this prophecy, “Say to those whose hearts are frightened: Be strong, fear not! Here is your God, he comes with vindication; with divine recompense, he comes to save you” (Isaiah 35:4).

This prophecy was partially fulfilled in the return of the exiles from Babylon to their home land. The full realization of the prophecy was in the coming of the Lord Jesus, the Redeemer God.

The redemptive event of the coming of the Lord was not a bolt out of the blue. God prepared his people for it over a long period of time through the prophecies, great rituals and events of the Old Testament and later through the work of John the Baptist.

“Say to those whose hearts are frightened: Be strong, fear not! Here is your God, he comes with vindication; with divine recompense, he comes to save you” (Isaiah 35:4). This message of hope helped the exiled know their captivity had come to an end.

God did not forget them. The same message applies to us today.

Christ has come and accomplished the work of redemption through “his blood of the cross” (Colossians 1:20). The world, however, is still in a state of becoming. There is still imperfection, suffering and sin. In our time, there have been many heartaches, wars, unrests, and crises. In fact, the 20th century has been arguably considered the bloodiest time in human history. Among the catastrophic events of this century were two world wars, which resulted in the extermination of millions of innocent lives. Looking into our individual and personal lives, things are not better. Most of us know so many pains, sorrows and trials of life. How can we make sense of these knowing the Lord has already come? The light of faith helps us to see that God uses even the sorrowful and painful events of this life to prepare us for the eternity of unconditional love. This, therefore, calls for patience and trust in God. Through St James, the Holy Spirit says to us, “Be patient brothers and sisters until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being

patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains” (James 5:7-8).

From its vantage point, the Gospel passage this Sunday, presents to us a portrait of St John the Baptist. Of whom the Lord said, “Among those born of women there has been none greater than him (Matthew 11:11). John in the prison represents all of us as we await the intervention of God in the various challenging situations of this life and look forward to the fullness of salvation at the end of our lives.

St. John the Baptist is the Lord's immediate precursor or forerunner, sent to prepare his way (Acts 13:24, Matthew 3:3) "Prophet of the Most High", John surpasses all the prophets, of whom he is the last (Luke 1:76). He inaugurates the Gospel, already from his mother's womb welcomes the coming of Christ, and rejoices in being "the friend of the bridegroom", whom he points out as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Going before Jesus "in the spirit and power of Elijah", John bears witness to Christ in his preaching, by his Baptism of conversion, and through his martyrdom (CCC 523).

St Augustine sums up the role of St John the Baptist in these words: “The Voice is John, the Word is Christ who was in the beginning. John is the voice that lasts for a time; from the beginning Christ is the Word who lives forever” (*The Voice is John, the Word is Christ*, Office of the Readings, 3rd Sunday of Advent, Year A). In addition to being the forerunner of the Messiah, John the Baptist fulfilled the role which Elijah returning was expected to play. Speaking about this our Lord said of John, “And if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah, the one who is to come. Whoever has ears ought to hear” (Matthew 11:14, cf Matt 17: 11-13).

There is a striking mystery here. John was imprisoned in the course of his prophetic work. While in the prison, he sent his disciples to Christ with this question, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?” (Matthew 11:3).

John and our Lord were second cousins and were only six months apart by birth. Could it be that John does not know Jesus any longer? No, there are many possible explanations to this puzzle. One is that John might be using a good educational principle that lets

the students encounter the truth first hand and they will never forget the lesson. It could also be that the trial of the moment had weighed John down and he needed reassurance from our Lord.

Some of us may wonder why our Lord did not miraculously set John free from the prison or bail him out of that unjust incarceration. This is a mystery of life. God does not always act the way we would want. This is because he sees far beyond what we see. When he was taunted to come down from the cross; he did not. When he was tempted to turn the stones into bread; he did not. He knows that this life is not all that there is. This world is a training ground for the life of eternal salvation and happiness. How then shall we conduct ourselves in the present time, especially when we face the trials and pains? Take, for instance, the death of a loved one, bodily sickness, emotional turmoil, and betrayal of a trusted friend or family member. It is to trust in the Lord and cooperate with his plan of salvation as Mary did. This is because we know that come rain, come shine, the Lord will always be there for us. “Blessed is the one who takes no offence at me” (Matt 11:6). So, here is the reason for our joy and our hope: The Lord is near. “Say to

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Here is your God ... he comes to save you” (Isaiah
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