

BIBLE SUNDAY 2013: COMMENTARY ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

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The decree on Revelation of the Second Vatican Council declared, 'In his love God chose to reveal himself in order to invite us into his friendship. The plan of salvation is expressed both in God's deeds throughout the history of salvation and in the words which make clear the mystery contained in them.' In deeds God's love for us is revealed in an unequalled way in the Incarnation of his son, Jesus Christ, which we celebrate at Christmas. **Bible Sunday reminds us to concentrate on the words by which God has revealed to us his love and offered us his friendship.**

The Council also opened up the readings from the Bible at the sacred liturgy, providing us with a much wider selection of readings which enable us to rejoice in a new way at the revelation of God's own nature and purposes in history, both in the story of the Old Testament People of God and in the Christian revelation. The Bible readings for Advent tell us in a new way in each year of the three-year cycle how the

birth of Christ at Christmas ("Christ's Mass") is the climax of world-history.

First Reading: A Shoot from the Stock of Jesse (Isaiah 11.1-10)

Isaiah is the special prophet of the Messiah, the messenger whom God would send as his herald and representative to put everything right. So Isaiah is the special prophet of Advent, and his prophecies are read at almost all the Sunday Masses in Advent. Isaiah spoke to the king of the line of David in Jerusalem at a time when the weak small kingdom was threatened by the advance of the super-powers of that age, who were gobbling up and enslaving all the little states of the Near East. He promised a return of the peace and justice of the ideal state portrayed in the Garden of Eden. There would be no more strife, even in the animal kingdom. The animals we know as hostile and destructive to each other would become friends and feed together. There would be no fear between them and human

beings. The ruler will at last judge justly, not on a whim or on hearsay, but by true evidence and with real insight and wisdom. The poor will no longer be oppressed and helpless victims of the rich.

Well, did Jesus do this? He began the reign of peace by going round and healing the sick, by bringing the alienated back into society, by welcoming all into God's love and forgiveness. He did not at a stroke destroy all evil, all fear, all sickness, all death (the last enemy). He was the image of God's love and forgiveness, walking the earth, giving us the example and inspiring in us that same love and forgiveness, showing us how to go out to others. At the same time he showed the justness and fairness of God, for he did not hesitate to rebuke where it was necessary. He could be daunting and threatening to those who refused the Kingship of God and its justice.

The completion of this Kingdom of peace and justice is still an ideal. We know only too well that it has

not been fully accomplished. There is war between nations, even war between those who claimed to follow Christ. There is war between families and within families. There is war within ourselves. There is still suffering and unfairness. The Garden of Eden is still an ideal state, but Jesus has brought it to earth and in himself fulfilled the ideal as a promise and foretaste of the peace and justice of the Kingdom. It will not be fully accomplished till the Kingdom of God is completed. Can we bring this peace and justice one step closer this Christmas? Then we can genuinely yearn and strive for the fulfilment of this ideal in God's good time.

Second Reading: The Generosity of Christ to all (Romans 15.4-9)

In Paul's mind humanity is divided into two species, Jews and gentiles. Paul himself was, of course, a Jew, and he saw Jesus as being the culmination of Judaism, the fulfilment of all the promises of God to Abraham. Judaism had been waiting for Christ for all those centuries and through all the changes and sufferings of the people of Israel. Now the completion had come. But with it had come an unexpected extension: God was offering the salvation promised to Israel to the gentiles as well. Paul's fundamental vision, his fundamental inspiration, was that salvation was offered to all peoples. The division of humanity into two species no longer exists, for all are one in Christ. In this great letter to the Romans he has been

explaining how salvation happens: the loving obedience of Christ to his Father undoes and wipes out the disobedience of Adam, of all humanity. Therefore all who put their trust in Christ's act of obedience can be saved. The Roman communities to which Paul was writing was composed of both Jews and gentiles. But Paul's vision is one of unity, of sharing. This is a constant theme in all his letters.

How do our Christian communities stand in this vision of unity? Are we models of forgiving and open unity, gathering all together in the service of God and the Risen Christ. At Christmas families come together. Do we really tease out the frictions even between family members? Are we aware that others too are the people of Christ, the lonely, the neglected, the poor? Can we help them to realise the joy and peace which Christ brings to all?

Gospel: John the Baptist's Call to Repentance (Matthew 3.1-12)

John the Baptist is an essential figure in every Advent, for he prepared the way of Christ. So in every Advent the gospel of the second Sunday shows John the Baptist gathering a people ready to receive Christ, a community ready for the Messiah. Then the third Sunday of Advent shows the Baptist pointing out Jesus as the Lamb of God. The Baptist's ferocious clothing and his proclamation of the prophet Isaiah are deliberate, to mark him out

as a prophet, as God's messenger, declaring that the long-awaited moment has come. He went and stood at the ford of the River Jordan where all the merchants and businessmen would be passing on their way to and from the East. He was challenging them to declare themselves.

His message is 'Repent!' This is not a morose brooding over past sins and failures, a merely negative idea. In Hebrew and Greek the concept is a change of behaviour. What was the most important thing in their lives? Was it the hope of Israel, the arrival of the Messiah? John is calling on them to change their ways, their whole scale of values, their whole direction of life. The details are not important; it is the change of direction that matters. Jesus himself would later proclaim, 'It is no good simply saying "Lord, Lord".' We must actually do something about it. We must do the will of the Father. What is the scale of values by which we live as we prepare for Christmas? What is our scale of values at Christmas itself? How comfortable would we be if Jesus came strolling in to join us at our Christmas party?

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