

## Commentary on the Sunday Readings

by **Fr Henry Wansbrough OSB**

***Today, as we celebrate Bible Sunday, it might be a moment to start or intensify a programme of reading the Bible in order to appreciate what the Lord is telling us in scripture about himself and about ourselves, the story of God's loving dealing with humanity and the strange and varied tale of the human response.***

The Church offers us a clear pattern of Bible readings on the Sundays of Advent. Each year of the three-year cycle of readings of the Gospel begins with a warning of the final coming of Christ: we may be beginning a new year, but that only makes the final coming, the 'Big Crunch', more imminent. Then on the second and third Sundays we turn to John the Baptist. On the second Sunday we see him preparing a community of repentance for the Lord, and on the third Sunday he points to Jesus. On the fourth Sunday of Advent we turn to Mary as she prepares for the birth of her Son. And of course this year, Year C, is the year of Luke, when all the Sunday Gospel readings are taken from that Gospel.

The other Bible readings fit in with this scheme. For Years A and B the first, Old Testament reading is normally from Isaiah, the special prophet of the Messiah. Only in this Year C do we range more widely among the prophets who announce the coming of the divine

Messenger. The second readings are normally taken from Paul, with one exception in each year, as he looks forward to the final coming of Christ. So the readings provide a rich treasury of reflections on the three comings of Christ. He came in history at Bethlehem. **He comes in mystery as he fills the Church each year with new strength and joy at the celebration of Christmas. He will come in majesty at the end of all things.**

It is often quite difficult to fathom out the sense of the Sunday readings, especially those from the Old Testament. On ordinary Sundays the Gospel readings work right through the Gospel of the year. The second readings work through the New Testament letters in semi-continuous reading, a few consecutive Sundays being allotted to each letter. The Old Testament readings, however, are more difficult to follow. They normally link to the Gospel reading of the day rather than to their context in their own Book.

### **FIRST READING: HIGH MOUNTAINS FLATTENED (BARUCH 5.1-9)**

This part of the Book of Baruch is a meditation on Isaiah's promises for Jerusalem at the return of Israel from exile in Babylon. It is, of course, taken up by John the Baptist in his proclamation that the high mountains will be flattened and the valleys filled in to make a smooth road for the Messiah to cross the desert to Jerusalem. There were many aspects of the expected

Messiah, the harbinger of God's kingship. For the later prophecies of Isaiah it was a conquering hero, his garments stained with the blood of his victories (Isaiah 63).

Today's prophecy reflects on an earlier prophecy of Isaiah (chapter 40). The reign of God is here more peaceful, a heartfelt dedication to God and the values of the divine sovereignty, for at this coming of God the names of Jerusalem shall be 'Peace through Justice' and 'Glory through Devotion'. True peace is possible only through the saving justice of God, when the People of God truly act as God's representatives, made in the image of God, and the envoys of his saving values. The ideal of God's kingdom appears in the Garden of Eden before the Fall, when his representatives, Adam and Eve, lived in perfect harmony with one another and with God's whole creation. We ask ourselves how much we strive for this peace, how much for our own advantage and supremacy.

### **SECOND READING: FILLED WITH THE FRUITS OF UPRIGHTNESS (PHILIPPIANS 1.3-6, 8-11)**

Paul always begins his letters with a commendation and a blessing. The Philippians to whom he is writing were Paul's favourite community. The letter is full of friendship and affection. Here he commends the Philippians for their partnership with him in the gospel, for their immediate response to the gospel-message. He simply prays that God's

work in them may be completed. So they may be ready for the Day of the Lord. The end of the world is a puzzle for us, both scientists and believers. What will happen as the universe rolls on its course? Will it end or simply renew itself interminably? Whatever the science, for most of us the Day of the Lord will be an individual welcome at our own end of the world. Even though Paul is held captive – or perhaps especially because he is held captive – he is waiting tranquilly and joyfully to welcome Christ, whose coming is so imminent. The coming of the Lord at Christmas is a symbol and a reminder of the final coming. Unless it brings us into his presence, and brings him more profoundly into our lives, it has no point. Are we preparing to make him welcome?

**GOSPEL: THE BAPTIST'S MESSAGE (LUKE 3.1-6)**

The Gospel of Matthew, written for Christians of Jewish origin, begins with the genealogy of Joseph of the House of David, descended from Abraham, a drum-roll of the great figures in the noble history of Israel. However Luke, writer of today's Gospel, delays the genealogy of Jesus till after the stories of his childhood. Then he gives a drum-roll of the contemporary rulers, noble and petty, in the eastern Roman Empire. He is writing for the inhabitants of the Roman Empire and is determined to show that this is a real history of real people. Jesus is a real historical figure, who was born, grew, lived and died.

Then enters John the Baptist, that wild figure in the desert of Judaea. How

different he is from those distinguished, prosperous and pampered potentates! He calls not simply for sorrow for sin but for a reversal, a new set of values, a change of heart. The Greek word (and John's original Hebrew or Aramaic) translated 'repentance' means a turn-about, a 180 degree change of direction. He brings a message of fire, of the axe put to the root of a rotten tree. So fierce is his message that he is puzzled by Jesus' welcome to sinners. Imprisoned, he sends messengers to ask if Jesus is really the one sent by God – or are we to wait for another? Amid the clamour of materialistic preparations for Christmas we may well ask what our values are. What would John the Baptist say to our plump turkeys, our piles of presents, our liquor store, our office parties? Do we welcome that message of putting crooked paths straight, of high hills levelled and valleys filled in?

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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This commentary has been based on an extract from his recently published *The Sunday Word*, which has homily notes for the whole lectionary cycle.

