



Third Sunday Advent 2006.

Isaiah 61: 1-2,10-11 1 Thess 5:16-24 John 1:6-8,19-28

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me!”

Chapter 61 of the book of Isaiah marks the beginning of a new section which is sometimes described as, the mission to the afflicted.

You will recall that it is this passage which Luke puts on Jesus’ lips at the beginning of his public ministry. These first two verses have become a kind of summary statement of Jesus’ mission. Here we have a line of continuity from Jewish scriptures through Jesus and into our own time.

“After God had spoken many times and in various ways through the prophets, in the last days he has spoken to us through his Son.”

Sacred Scripture of both Testaments are like a mirror in which the church, during its pilgrim journey, contemplates God. These words are from Vatican II, the document, *Divine Revelation*.

The messenger of God, at whatever point in history, is charged with the same message, to address the suffering of all peoples according to our abilities. God is the Anointer; it is God who hears the cry of the poor and it is God who sends saviours. Our response is, “Hear I am, Lord, send me.”

The last two verses of the chapter are a wonderful picture of the messenger. God is my joy. God has dressed me in wedding clothes. My robe is salvation and my mantle, justice. Why the image of wedding clothes?

There are two aspects on which we can reflect. Wedding clothes signify something special. They proclaim festivity. A bridal party stands out and calls attention to the occasion. The messenger of God becomes a sign to the afflicted community. Whatever we do in God’s name must be done with love and joy. This message is forgotten when the term “Do-gooders” is heard with disdain, often signifying that help is perceived to come at the price of loss of dignity. Nowhere in the Gospel does an encounter with Jesus mean loss of dignity; in fact the opposite is true.

People left Jesus’ presence more conscious of their worth.

The wedding also signals the beginning of a new life. The messenger of God recognises that he or she has entered into a new relationship. The *partner* is the beloved of God, the person who needs freedom, justice, or a broken heart restored.

The Gospel of John puts John the Baptist before us again.
“There was a man named John...”
This was probably the original opening of the Gospel.
John was questioned as to his identity by the authorities.
“Who are you?”

He replies that he is not a figure from the past nor is he the Messiah to come. He claims the title from Isaiah of the Voice-from-the-desert.
He is then asked, “Why do you baptise?”
In other words, from where does your authority come?

Many of the prophets used signs to emphasise their message.
Bathing is a straightforward sign of the need to be clean. The people who listened to John recognised that there were aspects of their lives which could be refreshed. They were glad of the chance to give witness to their need for conversion of heart.

Jesus did not use baptism as a sign of repentance in his ministry.
The Unknown One will use different signs. While John the Baptist is a model of the messenger of God, the Gospel writer is at pains to show us that the new messenger will be of the tradition, but significantly different.

With the coming of Jesus, we are given the definitive messenger of God, the divine presence who ministers among us.
All who respond to God’s call in the future will exercise their ministry in the name of Jesus Christ.

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