

## ADVENT II

*Behold, I send my angel before Thy face who shall prepare Thy way before Thee.*

Most Beloved in Christ,

Today's liturgy, that of the second Sunday in Advent, is dominated by the two important figures of Isaiah and John the Baptist. Isaiah is the principal Old Testament prophet who speaks of the coming of the Messiah. His words are used in today's Introit and echoed in the Epistle and Gospel readings in which both St. Paul and Jesus refer to his prophecies. St. John the Baptist himself, the last of the OT prophets and Our Savior's immediate forerunner, also refers to the witness of Isaiah.

In fact, the Prophet Isaiah pervades the whole liturgical corpus of the Advent season. And, on Christmas night it will be through his words that "Emmanuel" – that is, *God-Is-With-Us*, born of the humble Mary – and the divine greatness of the Prince of Peace will be extolled.

Two principal themes are found in today's Mass: the first is that Jesus is the Messiah of the poor – of all those who, cognizant of their sorry state, have recourse to Him and find in Him their true and everlasting treasure. The second theme is that Jesus is Savior of the Gentiles as well as the Jews: from the moment of our Lord's first coming in time, the "People of Sion" was opened to including every man, woman and child born into humanity.

It was to the people of Jerusalem that Isaiah first addressed the prophecy repeated in today's Introit, and it was to that same Jerusalem that the Divine Master announced the Gospel of His Kingdom. But St. Paul elaborates this message and directs Christians to that Jerusalem "which is above," that is to say, to the spiritual realm of God and His Revelation, the spiritual Jerusalem which flourishes in faith: the Kingdom of Grace that dwells in men's hearts, the Kingdom of Christ in Holy Church, the Kingdom of God in Heaven. It is only this spiritual Jerusalem which hears the Advent message: "People of Sion, behold, the Lord shall come to save the nations, and the Lord shall make the glory of His voice to be heard in the joy of your heart."

In today's Epistle reading, St. Paul, effectively synthesizing in a few words the vast wealth of thought contained in Holy Scripture, says: "everything written in times past was written for our instruction." He reduces Scripture to two lessons: "that through patience and encouragement, we might have hope." Patience is taught by the examples set by so many of the great figures whose histories are recorded in the Old Testament; *encouragement* is the message of the Divine Promises made to them. Together they engender *Hope*, that virtue which builds a stairway between this world here below and the glories of heaven which is to come.

Paul's epistle is addressed not only to the Romans but to the world over: all those subject to the grace of redemption. The Church is the Mystical Body of Christ, unified by the Revelation of God, its source of truth and might. St. Paul urges us to have a communion of minds, inspired by Jesus, so that we may, with *anima una et una voce* – one heart and voice – glorify Him Who is our God and Savior. And for that, charity must reign among us: it is that unifying bond which assures the welfare of the Church, our spiritual Jerusalem in this present life.

What was once only promised to our Fathers in the Old Testament is now open to all peoples in the New: the gate of the Church is opened wide and Christ, the long-awaited Messiah is that gate, full of hope. In today's Gospel there stands a person of singular power and purpose: John the Baptist, spirited & zealous, the untiring preacher of penance, the convincing embodiment of the spirit of Advent.

While John was held in prison because of his righteous denunciation of vice, the Master was proving his divine mission through word and deed. John thought the time opportune and sent his disciples to ask him the direct question: "Are you He-who-is-to-come?" Not that John did not know, but rather, he wanted his own disciples to know the truth of this Man since John knew his own end was drawing near. Jesus answered their queries with equal directness, citing as proof His *works*. Anyone who learned in the Prophets would recognize the messianic signs that He had performed: blindness, lameness, leprosy, death itself, were subject to him. But above the good news of universal salvation was being preached to the poor of this world. And with that, blessedness now and hereafter, was promised to those who would overcome all human respect and mere human wisdom to rally to the Christ, the Savior of the world. Briefly stated, this was the Kingdom of God now dawned upon men.

And even more important and impressive than John's testimony of the Messiah, was the example of his own behavior: Our Lord manifests the proof of His own doctrine by setting forth the startling holiness of His precursor. How his penetrating analysis of the man must have stung the fickleness, the sensuality and pride of his hearers! Would that in John we all saw our ideal of manly virtue and principle: "A reed swayed by the wind?" No, but a man whose every word is adamant; who lives and acts not as the wind blows but as his right conscience dictates. "Someone dressed in fine clothing?" No, but a man of humility, of the rank and file; who eats his bread in the sweat of his brow, who practices what he preaches, who fears God and gladly shares his meager earnings with his poorer neighbor. "A prophet?" Yes, and surpassing all prophets, for by his virtue and fortitude he merited to be the pathfinder, the leader to God's Kingdom on earth. "And that," Mother Church would seem to say, "is the true ideal of Christian manhood." Would that the tiniest measure of the praise Christ bestowed on the Baptist be applicable to me and you! Indeed, would that our loyalty to Him merit the Master's commendation!

It was, and continues to be, those poor in spi-rit, those men of goodwill moved by the voice of the Baptist, the angel sent to prepare Our Lord's way, who hear the Redeemer's call. Patience in the long journey here below, penance and repentance on the path to Bethlehem. It is to the Christian touched by the grace of salvation offered, that this Advent season and its message is given.

Let us turn the ears of our hearts yet again towards His call to conversion of life and soul, that, united in the bond of charity we may come to behold the face of Him Who awaits us in that poor manger in Bethlehem.

*Isaiah, John, Mary and Paul – obtain for us the grace of perseverance so that in time we may join you in looking upon the glory of Him in Heaven whose birth we approach in the midst of our daily struggles. This we beg in Jesus' name. Amen.*