

The Second Sunday of Advent – some reflections on the readings

The Second Vatican Council restored the meaning of Advent from a largely penitential season into its original purpose as a time of hope. This has had a knock-on effect throughout the Church. We remember the coming of Christ in the flesh, and we acknowledge how he must come more deeply in our Church and in the world so that we may truly live as transformed human beings. We need repentance, of course, but in its true meaning of conversion, literally change of heart and mind, a turning round of our life towards God. And we need hope, especially hope that the kingdom of God will come as a living reality and experience. To deepen this hope, we need to learn to see the signs of it already present among us, not least in our growing in love for one another and in compassion for the world, with a longing for the justice that is denied to so many people.

Malachi 3: 1 – 4

‘Malachi’ may not be this prophet’s actual name. It simply means ‘my messenger’ as in the first verse of this passage. The book consists of six dialogues between the prophet and the people in the century following exile in Babylonia and restoration to the Jewish homeland. The prophet chastises them over several corrupt ways they have fallen into. The message turns to one of hope in this chapter, that the Lord is coming to purify his people, preceded by his messenger who at the end of the book is identified with Elijah, the prophet who did not die but was ‘taken up to heaven in a whirlwind’ (2 Kings 2: 11). In the New Testament, Elijah is identified with John the Baptist (Mark 1: 2, Matthew 11: 10) who prepares a way for the Lord, but in a person and a way unexpected, even by him.

Psalms 126

This is one of the short ‘ascent psalms’ (as Psalms 120 – 134 are called). They were probably known by heart and sung by Jewish pilgrims journeying up to Jerusalem. This psalm delights in the return of the exiles from Babylon (from 538BC) but also prays for the return of other Jewish exiles scattered around the near eastern world. The impossibility of streams in the Negev desert is symbolic of hope that nothing will be impossible for God in bringing joyful life to his faithful people.

Philippians 1: 3 – 11

Philippi (named after Philip of Macedonia, the father of Alexander the Great) was the first city in Europe to be visited by Paul according to Acts 16. Paul had a special affection for this new Christian community which seemed to have a wonderful sense of fellowship inspired by ‘sharing in the gospel’ (v.5). He strikes a real note of joy in this letter in spite of the imprisonment he is undergoing as he writes. This is undoubtedly an earlier incarceration than his final one in Rome and is likely to have been at Ephesus. Paul is confident that the Philippian Christians will grow in faith, love, and transformed lives which will make them most effective workers in the cause of Christ and his gospel. A letter of inspiration to us all that we too may grow in our Christian identity and vocation.

Luke 3: 1 – 6

In these few verses Luke introduces the subversive nature of the gospel in marginalising the political establishment of the day. The coming of Christ means a new world order is being created. Those who choose him now will undergo inner transformation (salvation). When the Lord comes in his fullness, not only will people be transformed or saved, but all creation will be renewed. Only a few recognised Christ when he appeared on the earth. Only a

minority follow him now. But the day will come when he will be universally seen and acknowledged. Such is the Christian hope, but our calling is to work in partnership with him so that he becomes more visible through us who have been baptized into his life.

A prayer for this Sunday:

God our Father, we know today how to pierce mountains and level hills to build highways. But we have lost the way to each other's hearts and to you. May Jesus come among us to make us inventive and daring enough to build roads of justice, peace and love enabling him to be seen and active in our own time and place.

We ask this in the name of him whom we expect and who is waiting for us, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.