

Third Sunday of Advent

Choosing the right Christmas present for someone can be quite difficult. But some people seem to do this very well. I think it can only happen when the giver has taken the time to really get to know the one who is going to be gifted. We don't give chocolates to those who can't eat them. An expensive bottle of wine is wasted on someone who only drinks beer.

If we were intending to give a Christmas present to John the Baptist, our gospel today would help us to know a little bit more about who he is. We are reading from St. John's gospel. The first two verses are part of the prologue to John's gospel. The rest is what is called the first day of the story of Jesus. In the prologue we learn that John was sent by God, sent as a witness to speak for the light so that everyone might believe through him. Jesus and John are the only ones in the story described as "sent by God". But the evangelist makes it clear that John is not the light, but only a witness to the light.

The rest of today's gospel describes how John witnesses to Jesus. He is asked by the priests and Levites to identify himself. He tells them first who he is not. "I am not the Christ. I am not Elijah. I am not the prophet". He is rather the voice that cries in the wilderness. "Make a straight way for the Lord" He is

baptising only with water, but the one coming after him will baptise with the Holy Spirit. If we read on beyond today's gospel to day two of the story of Jesus, we would hear John describing Jesus in much more detail. He witnesses to Jesus being the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, the one upon whom the Spirit rests, and God's only Son.

The role that John plays as a witness to Jesus can remind us that each of us is also called to that role. We too are called to make Jesus known to others. We can only do that when we know who Jesus is for us. We can only speak to others about what we have learnt. We can only show others what Jesus is like when we have become like him.

That can be a bit scary. But before we think it is impossible we should look again at today's other readings. We usually immediately associate today's first reading from the prophet Isaiah with Jesus. Jesus quotes these words at the beginning of his public ministry in the synagogue of Nazareth. But we should hear them first as being spoken by the prophet himself, to describe the ministry that God has given to him. "The spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor, to bind up hearts that are broken." Chosen by God and anointed with the Spirit Isaiah

could speak in the name of God. He could not be a prophet if the spirit of God was not at work in him. You and I cannot be witnesses to Jesus if the Spirit of God is not at work in us. But when the Spirit is at work in us then we can make Jesus known by what we say and what we do. The Spirit makes us witnesses to Christ.

Isaiah speaks of a great joy that comes from knowing that God has chosen him to be his prophet. That is not to say that his work will be easy and without pain and disappointment. But the joy comes from deep within him. The joy comes from his union with God. We prayed Mary's Magnificat as our psalm today. Mary also expresses her joy. She rejoices in God at work in her. "The Almighty works marvels for me. Holy his name! His mercy is from age to age on those who fear him.". Mary can see the pattern of God's work in her and in the world around her. Her union with God sets her heart dancing.

There is something of that in what St. Paul says today as well. He tells us to be happy at all times. He urges us to pray constantly and for all things to give thanks to God. Paul knows that we are happy when we are aware of God at work in us. Praying constantly doesn't mean saying prayers all day. Praying constantly is an attitude that we take on when we are trying to be attentive to God at work in us and in those around us. Being

attentive to God allows us to notice what God might be doing. Then we are able to give thanks to God for all things, especially for those little things that God is doing that other people miss. Those who are praying at all times notice the wonderful timing of God that most would call coincidence or just luck.

Paul's good advice continues when he says, "Never try to suppress the Spirit or treat the gift of prophecy with contempt;" He wants us to understand that God's Spirit longs to be at work in each one of us. But God has given us the freedom to limit what God can do in us. Paul prays that we may be open to God Spirit. "May the God of peace make you perfect and holy; and may you all be kept safe and blameless, spirit soul and body, for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Christ has called you and he will not fail you."

Paul's prayer is a beautiful Advent prayer for us. We want to be ready for the Lord to come again at Christmas. But in a way every day is Christmas. The Lord comes each day to those who are open to his Spirit. The Lord comes so that we can be witnesses to others of his great love for us. Isn't that what Christmas giving is all about? Whatever gift we choose to give others is really only a sign of our wanting to respond to the gift that we have already received in Jesus.