

Third Sunday of Advent

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. But John doesn't seem to say very much about Jesus in the part that we read. He spends most of his time telling us that he is not the Christ. He is but the voice that cries in the wilderness, "Make a straight way for the Lord". 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. But what he does witness about Jesus today is very important. He tells the Pharisees, "I baptise with water; but there stands among you, unknown to you, the one who is coming after me."

You and I need to hear that there is someone who stands among us and for most of the time he is not recognised by us. Failing to recognise Jesus is almost a theme in John's Gospel. We see it with the Samaritan woman at

the well, with Nicodemus, with Mary of Magdala beside the empty tomb and with Peter and the other disciples fishing on the lake after the Resurrection. We can become so wrapped up in our own troubles and worries that we fail to recognise the one person who can work with us to find a solution to all that concerns us. We can fail to recognise that Jesus is in our midst offering us the words of eternal life.

When we think of the way that John the Baptist witnesses to the hidden Jesus among us it is good to be reminded that we too are called to be witnesses to Jesus. We too are called to make Jesus known to others. We seldom do that in an obvious way. We are called to be the witnesses of the hidden Jesus who lives within us and who loves through us. We can do that more readily when we have come to know who Jesus is for us. We can witness to Jesus more powerfully when we have come to be like him.

Before we think that this is something beyond us 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 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 pray that we are ready for the Lord to come again at Christmas. We pray with Paul that the Lord may come to us every day so that we can be witnesses to others of his great love for us.