

Dear Brothers and Sisters:

As we move closer and inexorably to the great feast of the Nativity of Our Lord, today's readings provide us with some "food for the journey." The Scriptures help fortify us on our pilgrim's way so we can meet Jesus when he comes to us. In the first reading from Isaiah, we hear echoes of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit. "The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him; a spirit of wisdom and of understanding, a spirit of counsel and of strength, a spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord." Although the fruit of piety is not expressly spoken here, it is implied by the very prophetic call of Isaiah to a conversion of heart in anticipation of the coming of the Messiah.

These markers of our spiritual life are essential to living in the Spirit and conforming ourselves more authentically to Christ. As Isaiah so beautifully expresses, the people of Israel are being oriented to look to the future with hope, knowing that God will deliver them from captivity. The root of Jesse refers to the lineage of King David (Jesse was David's father). Although the Jewish people long for the restoration of the great kingship of David, what awaits them as salvation unfolds is so much greater: the coming of the Messiah in the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The Incarnation will forever change the landscape of human history; Isaiah reveals how the routine of everyday expectations will never be the same. Former adversaries will live together in harmony; "there shall be no harm or ruin on all my holy mountain, for the earth shall be filled with knowledge of the Lord." So radical is Isaiah's prophetic call that now salvation will be available to all of human history, Jews and Gentiles alike.

The late eminent twentieth-century Jesuit theologian Father Walter J. Burghardt, S.J., offered an excellent reflection as we consider this Second Sunday in Advent. In To Christ I Look: Homilies at Twilight, Burghardt wrote, "Isaiah and John move me to the Church - the Church right now, here in Advent. The liturgy leaves no room for argument: the Lord is coming, and we are to prepare his way. But it doesn't make sense - nowhere near the sense it made for the Old Testament prophet and the forerunner of the Lord. After all, the Lord has already come. Yes, the Lord has come - thank God! He comes constantly to you: comes to you through the grace that is God within you, comes to you through the Eucharist that moves from the tabernacle on an altar to the tabernacle of your body, comes to you in the hundreds of humans who meet your eyes each day. The crucial question for each and every Christian is: How aware am I of Christ's presence?"

What Christians need in Advent is not a second or third coming of Christ; he is here. We need a fresh awareness of his presence, an awareness that works a ceaseless change in our lives. Christians must recapture the rapturous feeling our Lady had as she felt the Word made flesh of her grow within her, the emotions that swept over John the Baptizer when he recognized the Savior he had been selected to run before."

Amen!

Fr. Tom