

BIBLICAL RESOURCES

Isaiah 61:1-2, 10-11; The Magnificat; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

Among you stands the one who is coming after me

John 1:6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

19 This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" 20 He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." 21 And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." 22 Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" 23 He said,

"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said.

24 Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. 25 They asked him, "Why then are you baptising if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" 26 John answered them, "I baptise with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, 27 the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." 28 This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptising.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The community of the Fourth Gospel came from different backgrounds: followers of John the Baptist, Samaritans, Gentiles and Pharisees. Because of the continuing existence of disciples of John, the anxiety vis-à-vis the Baptist is even more heightened than elsewhere.

Four examples may suffice: the poetry of the Prologue is interrupted by prose (today's first paragraph), designed to put John in the second division; John is then made himself to quote the OT citation at the start of Mark's account; the bap-



Byzantine baptistry at Aenon

tism of Jesus by John is not recounted, although associated phenomena are; the death of John is not presented to prevent any comparisons with the unique "lifting up" of the Son of Man.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

There is clear reference to the first reading of today's mass:

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." (Isaiah 40:3)

As in Mark's version, this text is adjusted to read as follows: "Prepare the way of the Lord." From a practical point of view, a voice crying out the wilderness doesn't make a lot of sense.

KIND OF WRITING

There are three moments in the text.

(i) Vv. 6-8 are prose commentary by the writer on the identity of John.

(ii) Vv. 19-23 constitute technically a *chreia*, that is an anecdote or scene with a point, developed in the form of questions and answers and concluding conclusively with a citation of God's word from the prophet Isaiah.

(iii) Vv. 24-28 go back to the theme of comparison and make explicit the distinction between John and Jesus.

Thought for the day

In the words of John's Gospel, John the Baptist came as a witness, to speak for the light, the true light who was coming into the world. In this season of Advent, he points us towards the coming one and he invites us to reflect on our need of the light of Jesus in the darkness of our lives. Darkness means many things: a sense of being lost, a lack of direction, helplessness, sin or indeed lack of faith. This Christmas, may the God who said "Let light shine out of darkness," shine in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor 4:6).

Prayer

We come before you in the darkness of our lives, aware of our need of Christ, the light of the world. Let us receive him in faith so that we may become witnesses to that light which has come into the world.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

Mark implies that John was Elijah and Matthew makes it explicit. In this Gospel, however John himself denies he was the expected Elijah. Furthermore in this Gospel there is a nuanced appreciation of who he was: the voice in relation to the word, the best man ("the friend") in relation to the bridegroom.

He who has the *bride* is the *bridegroom*. The *friend of the bridegroom*, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the *bridegroom's* voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. (John 3:29)

At this point in John 3, it is apparently the Baptist who is speaking. The picture of John the Baptist in the gospel of John is very clearly focused, and it may be summed up in one of the gospel's pungent statements: "He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light" (1:8).

ST PAUL

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to

wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light; let us live honourably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. (Romans 13:11-14)

Cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:15-5:11.

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 6 The first statement is positive: John was sent by God. “Send” is an important word in the Fourth Gospel, being almost a name for God who sends Jesus, John and Jesus’ disciples.

Verse 7 Witness is a key category in the Gospel: John 1:7; 3:28; 8:17.

Verse 8 Naturally, it is Jesus himself who is the light. “Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”” (John 8:12) “As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”” (John 9:5) “I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness.” (John 12:46)

Verse 19 This is a real question, already asked by Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels: “Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin? Answer me.” (Mark 11:30)

Verse 20 Notice the triple insistence: he confessed, did not deny, confessed. The expectation of a Messiah is not attested in the Hebrew Bible but is in the later non-biblical books of Judaism, such as the Dead Sea Scrolls or the Psalms of Solomon. It is not without significance that the first things John says are denials of mistaken identity. Lest there should be any lack of clarity, the writer makes him repeat the denial later in the story: “You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, ‘I am not the Messiah, but I have

been sent ahead of him.” (John 3:28)

Verse 21 There was an expectation that Elijah would be part of the final unfolding, based on Malachi 4:5. Likewise, there was an expectation that a prophet like Moses would be part of the end, based on Deuteronomy 18:15.

Verse 22 After all the denials, this is a good question.

Verse 23 Here the author plays his trump card—he makes *John himself* cite the Isaiah text, which allocates to him a preparatory role and no more.

Verse 24 All religions use water symbolism and Judaism is no exception. However, the once-off baptism of John was exceptional and required interpretation. The questioners also summarise the denials, making for a very powerful insistence.

Verse 25 John uses the opportunity not to explain his baptism but to point to Jesus. We expect a line such as “but he will baptism with the Spirit” but instead we are offered “whom you do *not* know”, a resonant theme in this Gospel.

Verses 26-27 An explicit echo of the synoptic traditions: “He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.” (Mark 1:7; see also Luke 3:16; Acts 13:25).

Verse 28 In this Gospel, *Jesus* is also shown baptising: “After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he spent some time there with them and baptised. John also was baptising at Aenon near Salim because water was abundant there; and people kept coming and were being baptised” (John 3:22-23; see also John 3:26; 4:1-2; 10:40). In chapter 4, it says Jesus did *not* baptise.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. John the Baptist came to bear witness to Jesus. Who have been the people who have borne witness to you of the good

news of the gospel that God loves you - a friend, a parent, a teacher, etc? To whom have you borne that witness

2. John appears in the story as one who had the courage to be himself in the face of loud and aggressive people. He was also a person who knew his own value, did not make exaggerated claims and was content with his mission. Can you recall times when you have been able to be yourself, even in the face of criticism from others?

3. John was “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness”—announcing confidently to those in the wilderness that they must not despair because God’s grace will come to them at any moment. Have you had the experience of being in the wilderness, feeling lost? From whom did you hear a voice that gave you hope? Have you been able to give hope to other people when they were in the wilderness?

4. The priests and Levites challenged John the Baptist on his authority for speaking as he did and tried to put a label on him so that they could more easily dismiss what he had to say. When were you open to accept a truth from whom a person whom you had previously dismissed as having nothing to say to you?

PRAYER

O God, most high and most near, you send glad tidings to the lowly, you hide not your face from the poor; those who well in darkness you call into the light.

Take away our blindness, remove the hardness of our hearts, and form us into a humble people, that, at the advent of your Son, we may recognise him in our midst and find joy in his saving presence.

This prayer we make through him whose coming is certain, whose day draws near, your Son, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, forever and ever. Amen.

Advent Readings				Themes	
Advent 1	Is 63:16-17; 64:1, 3-8	Ps 80 (79)	1 Cor 1:3-9	Mk 13:33-37	End of Time
Advent 2	Is 40:1-5, 9-11	Ps 85 (84)	2 Pet 3:8-14	Mk 1:1-8	John the Baptist
Advent 3	Is 61:1-2, 10-11	Magnificat	1 Thess 5:16-24	Jn 1:6-8,19-28	John the Baptist
Advent 4	2 Samuel 7:1-5,8-11,16	Ps 89 (88)	Rom 16:25-27	Lk 1:26-38	Mary

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances

1 Thess 5:12 *But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labour among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; 13 esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. 14 And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. 15 See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. 16 Rejoice always, 17 pray without ceasing, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. 19 Do not quench the Spirit. 20 Do not despise the words of prophets, 21 but test everything; hold fast to what is good; 22 abstain from every form of evil.*

23 May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The joy of the Gospel is very evident in the writings of St Paul (see more texts below). This is true also in Paul's very first letter, 1 Thessalonians. Joy is emphasised even though believers may be undergoing tremendous challenges. In 2 Corinthians he refers again to the Christians in Macedonia (of which Thessalonica was the Roman capital): *We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.* (2Corinthians 8:1-2)

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

Writing probably from Corinth, Paul needed to rebuild relationships with the Christians in Thessalonica. There were also questions they had to which he responds in the letter: living in the Roman empire, what happens to the dead and when will the end be. Paul had spent enough time in their city to establish a community with leaders, who are mentioned in the expanded reading above.

KIND OF WRITING

The whole of 1 Thessalonians is a letter laid out using the structure of a speech. Thus, it may be read in two lenses, epis-

tolary and rhetorical.

1:1 Letter superscript
1:2-10 Thanksgiving / introduction
1:9-10 Topic, in three parts
2:1-3:12 Relationships
4:1-12 Holiness
4:13-5:11 End time issues
5:12-23 Exhortation / conclusion
5:24 Letter postscript

Our reading, as a result, comes from the second half of the closing exhortation and the final postscript. It happens in Paul's letters that at the final words of encouragement, he falls into a kind of *staccato* writing, with a pile-up of pithy imperatives. See Romans 12 below.

RELATED PASSAGES

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. *Rejoice* in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. *Rejoice* with those who *rejoice*, weep with those who weep. (Romans 12:9-15)

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, *Rejoice*. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:4-7)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 16 Joy does not exclude suffering; on the contrary, they often go together. For joy, both as verb and noun, as a feature of Paul's worldview, see: Rom 12:12, 15; 14:17; 15:13, 32; 16:19; 1 Cor 7:30; 13:6; 16:17; 2 Cor 1:24; 2:3; 6:10; 7:4, 7, 9, 13, 16; 8:2; 13:9, 11; Gal 5:22; Phil 1:4, 18, 25; 2:2, 17-18, 28-29; 3:1; 4:1, 4, 10; 1 Thess 1:6; 2:19-20; 3:9; 5:16; Phlm 1:7. As you can see, all seven uncontested letters are represented.

Verses 17-18 Paul himself is a man of constant prayer, as can be seen in the thanksgivings which open six of the un-

contested letters.

Verses 19-20 There is no hint that they were quenching the Spirit (see 1 Thess 1:5-7). V. 20 is the only mention in this letter of Christian prophecy, important elsewhere for Paul (1 Corinthians 14).

Verse 21-22 Instructions useful at any time and here illustrating the *staccato* imperatives.

Verse 23 Like many a preacher, Paul frequently concludes his persuasion with a prayer, not only drawing the various threads together but also bringing the hearers consciously into God's presence. In particular, there is a strong echo of the introduction (1:2-10).

Verse 24 The emphasis on the faithfulness of God may seem strange to us. However, it is very rooted in the OT (e.g., Deut 7:9, 32:4 and many other examples) and it was also part of the apocalyptic worldview. That worldview asked where was God in the midst of persecution and death and the answer is always "God is faithful." In Jewish tradition, God's faithfulness will be evident in the resurrection of the dead. In Christian tradition, God's faithfulness is also apparent in Jesus' crucifixion (see Rom 3:21-26 in the NET translation). A faithful God was also a contrast with the fickle arbitrariness of the (frequently immoral) deities of Greece and Rome. Cf., *You turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God* (1Thessalonians 1:9).

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. If someone were to describe my experience of "the joy of the Gospel," where would I begin? As it been my experience that joy and suffering go together?
2. For what should I give thanks to God at this point in my life? According to Meister Eckhardt, if the only prayer we ever said was one of thanksgiving it would be sufficient.
3. God is faithful: can I name my own experience of God's faithfulness to me?

PRAYER

Living and faithful God, in you we find the deep springs of love and joy. Help us to embrace these gifts that others may be drawn to the Good News in Jesus.

Grant this through him, your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

The Lord has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed

Isa 61:1 The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners;² to proclaim the year of the LORD'S favour, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn;

Isa 61:10 I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. 11 For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Only four verses, but how deep and rich! It would be hard not to be moved by the hope and energy of these lines.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The reading comes from a long poem in Third Isaiah (Is 61) of which we read just the first two and the last two verses.

KIND OF WRITING

In times of plenty and apparent stability, the prophets warn and frighten. In times when unending disaster seems all there is, they speak words of life, energy and joy. This is not simply because they are contrary. Prophets shake people out of their slumber and complacency to take hold again of the reality of God and the truly endless potential of life with God on our side.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

(1) *Spirit anointing:*

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching. (Isaiah 42:1-4)

(2) *Marriage metaphors:*

In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun, which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy, and like a strong man runs its course with joy. Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them; and nothing is hid from its heat. (Psalms 19:4-6)

You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the LORD delights in you, and your land shall be married. For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you. (Isaiah 62:4-5)

(3) *Jubilee year:*

And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, or reap the aftergrowth, or harvest the unpruned vines. For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you: you shall eat only what the field itself produces. (Leviticus 25:10-12)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 This is an evocation of Is 42:1-9 and 49:1-6. Anointed gives us the word messiah, lit. anointed one. The verses list conditions of oppression (broken-hearted, captives, prisoners) and the good news of God (to bind up, liberty, release).

Verse 2 The Year of Jubilee, at least in theory, was a year of rest for the land and, in a way, rest for the people, a kind of sabbatical. So that people would not be trapped forever in cycles of never-ending indebtedness, it was also to be a time when all loans were remitted. Vengeance here does not mean vendetta, it means rather God's energy for what is right and just. The mourners are not simply the bereaved; it also means those who are not afraid to recognise and name the present difficulties. Not accidentally, the Exile came to an end after some fifty years of servitude—it was time for rest and jubilation.

Verse 10 At the end of the poem, a note of intense joy is struck. These two verses are really a thanksgiving song. The language moves from internal feeling to outward expression and from there to comparison with a wedding. Salvation and justice (righteousness) are really the one thing and God's love is also God's acting justly to all. Earlier in Isaiah 59:15-17 and later in 63:1-9, God fighting for justice will wear garments of vengeance and robes soaked in blood. The contrast is all the greater, when we see what kind of garments the faithful will wear.

Verse 11 Continuing the note of joy, a spring garden is painted before our eyes. It is not only a metaphor. God causes the garden to grow miraculously. He can also act on humans so as to bring about endless praise. Even the nations will see, eventually, God's justice towards and God's vindication of the faithfulness of Israel.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. All disciples, without distinction have a calling from God, God who has anointed each of us to bear the Good News. How do I live and make real this responsibility for the gospel in our day?

2. Perhaps I can identify or could identify in the past with the oppressed and the broken-hearted, the captives and the prisoners. What gives me sustenance? How have I experience and lived "being set free"?

3. On this third Sunday of Advent our theme is joy, really anticipatory joy as we approach the feast of Christ's birth. Joy, while not always extrovert, is part and parcel of being Christian.

4. Perhaps I have a garden and know from first-hand experience the wonder of planting and seeing my own flowers and vegetables grow. Brown earth becomes a tulip, beautiful to look at, or an apple, delicious to eat. The same creator God is a work in me, causing "righteousness and praise" to spring up.

PRAYER

Creator God, you know our needs better than we do ourselves. Send into our hearts your Spirit of life and love that we may know the joy of your presence in our lives. Open in us the springs of joy and praise that our whole life may witness to you, creator and giver of all.

THE LITURGY

Isaiah 61:1-2, 10-11; The Magnificat; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

READINGS 1 AND 3

There is an anticipation of the Gospel in the first reading, in so far as the prologue of John (1:6-8) speaks of the light which is Christ. But the real link is with the second reading today. Both the prophet and Paul take up the theme of rejoicing, on this special Sunday of Advent and both speak of the Spirit to be given. God's very own faithfulness—to himself and to his people—is the foundation of Christian faith and hope and joy.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Exceptionally, the responsorial “psalm” is not a psalm at all, but a canticle from the New Testament. This prayer is well chosen as part of the lead-up to the Christmas celebration. It expresses a kind bubbling, uncontainable joy in God's presence. At the same time, it does not omit the concerns of justice, as we hear in Luke 1:52-55.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Isaiah 61:1-2, 10-11

As Christmas draws near, we all feel a certain anticipation and excitement. Our first reading captures that mood: it is full of the happiness of faith and joy in life and in God.

Second reading

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

I suppose no one can “command” us to be happy...and yet, Paul does just that in this reading! But he expands and illustrates how we can be not just “reasonably contented” but deeply happy.

Gospel

John 1:6-8, 19-28

You don't often hear a Gospel passage where Jesus is absent! But if you listen carefully, you will notice he is present.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 18 December

Jeremiah 23:5-8

The memory of the past can give us energy in the present. In today's reading,

this happens *twice*: the memory of God's faithfulness to the David is evoked and the Exodus is recalled with a view to a new liberation, this time from the Exile in Babylon.

Matthew 1:18-24

This passage continues after the genealogy which opens Matthew's Gospel. God-with-us—*Emmanuel*—reminds us of God's word to Jacob, Moses, Joshua, David, Solomon, Jeremiah and so forth. Also to us, if we reflect back.

Tuesday 19 December

Judges 13:2-7, 24-25

The birth stories of Jesus in Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2 often echo highly significant accounts in the Old Testament. Today's reading from Judges is an example: an annunciation to a woman who is childless. There is even a similarity between the word nazirite (a kind of prophet) and Nazareth (or Nazarene).

Luke 1:5-25

Our Gospel is also an annunciation but this time to a childless father, to Zechariah the priest who is to become the father of John the Baptist.

Wednesday 20 December

Isaiah 7:10-14

This passage from Isaiah is explicitly cited in Matthew's account of the annunciation to Joseph in a dream.

Luke 1:26-38

The annunciation to Mary (the fourth in our sequence) matches the pattern of OT annunciation and then, significantly, breaks it. Mary is a virgin.

Thursday 21 December

Song of Songs 2:8-14

You may be surprised to hear in Advent a reading often used at weddings. It is however very suitable for two reasons. (1) Love is the ‘reason for the season’ as they say. (2) Like the lover bounding over the hills, Mary in the Gospel travels across the hill country to visit Elizabeth, her cousin.

Luke 1:39-45

Luke joins his two strands of narrative in

this encounter between the two mothers. We notice the deep things said about Jesus before his birth.

Friday 22 December

1 Samuel 1:24-28

Hannah very much wanted to have a baby and, after the child's birth, sang a great song of thanksgiving. Hannah's song was the inspiration behind Mary's song of thanksgiving, the Magnificat, in Luke's Gospel.

Luke 1:46-56

Our responsorial “psalm”—the Song of Hannah—closely resembles the prayer of Mary in the Magnificat. Although this purports to be the meeting of the two pregnant cousins, very little is said of the children to come and instead we hear a great deal about social upheaval and reversal.

Saturday 23 December

Malachi 3:1-4, 23-24

To music lovers, this reading will sound familiar, from Handel's *Messiah*. Malachi says that a figure like Elijah will usher in the end. This was taken to John the Baptist who ushered in, so to speak, the Messiah and the messianic age.

Luke 1:57-66

The birth of John is told to lay the foundation for the similar yet significantly different birth of Jesus. Both come as the result of a promise. On both occasions, there is “treasuring in the heart.” Both children will enjoy the blessing of God. And yet, one is the forerunner and the other is the Christ.

