

## Third Sunday of Advent, Year A, Catechist

Submitted by lectionaryadmin on Thu, 07/18/2013 - 20:00

### **Catechist Background and Preparation**

To prepare for this session read all the readings.

Isaiah 35:1-6, 10

Psalm 146:6-7, 8-9, 9-10

James 5:7-10

Matthew 11:2-11

Spend a few minutes reflecting on what these readings mean for you today. Was there a particular reading that appealed to you? Was there a word or image that engaged you?

Read the Word in Liturgy and Catholic Doctrine sections. These give you background on what you will be doing this session. Read over the session outline and make it your own. Check to see what materials you will need for the session.

## **The Word in Liturgy**

Today's passage, which links first and second Isaiah, describes the coming redemption of Israel in glowing terms of nature restored and human beings made whole. The prophet's message in first Isaiah was devoted mainly to decrying Israel's infidelity and announcing God's judgment. In this section, however, the emphasis shifts to news of a coming rescue by that same God—a strong theme of second Isaiah. The people, scattered and sent into exile by the destruction of the kingdom through the Assyrian invasion, will be ransomed and brought back into their land. They will be helped along their journey of return by visions of a saving God, by a transformation of the desert land, and by divine strengthening and healing. Lebanon, Carmel, and Sharon in their dryness are symbols of God's wrath (see 33.9); here they bloom to betoken God's mercy. The passage ends on a note of joy.

Today's Gospel comes from a different tradition than the one Matthew used in recounting the story of Jesus' baptism. Hence, John inquires about Jesus as if he did not know him. Much of the passage concerns the kind of Messiah Jesus is. In contrast with the gospel read last week, which emphasized the eschatological judgment that the coming Messiah would bring ("the wrath to come," a baptism of fire, the winnowing fan to separate wheat from chaff, and so on), today's passage focuses on the qualities of mercy that mark the Messiah's reign. He brings healing to the blind and lame, to lepers and the deaf. He raises the dead and preaches glad tidings to the poor. Those who can accept this Messiah are blessed. The passage then goes on to reflect on John the Baptist—his extraordinary ascetic personality and powerful mission. Scripture scholars have speculated that followers of John may have persisted after the coming of Jesus, and that this passage is one of several which attempt to reconcile John's ministry with that of Jesus. In any case, John's identity as prophet and forerunner of the Messiah is lauded here in the highest possible terms. In a surprising twist, the calling of the followers of Jesus is said to surpass even that of John. A new age has truly dawned with the coming of Jesus the Messiah.

Our doctrinal focus on the charism of prophecy can help to illuminate the meaning of all three of today's readings. Isaiah's prophetic message, present throughout the Advent season, reaches beyond its immediate historical context and still speaks to us today. The prophets, as James suggests, serve as models of faithfulness in spite of hardship and persecution. And John the Baptist, the last of the prophets of old, sets the stage for the coming of Jesus. We Christians, who are "born into God's reign," can reflect with awe and joy today on our own calling to share in the charism of these prophets.

## **Catholic Doctrine**

### ***The Charism of Prophecy***

The Catholic understanding of prophets and prophecy rests upon the testimony of Old Testament scriptures. These sacred texts show that a prophet is one called by God to speak God's message in a specific historical situation. The message of the prophet Isaiah, for example, is characterized by the strong theme of God's future that will be accomplished through the agency of the messiah. Jeremiah is known for his forthright stance before God, resisting the call at first but then persevering in the face of continual rejection by the people. These Old Testament books paint a picture of the prophet that represents both challenge and hope for the people of God. Prophets communicated God's judgment, but they also conveyed God's promise of mercy and revitalization in times of decline or confusion. Because their message was often unwelcome, they suffered hardships and persecution in fulfilling their calling.

Catholics consider John the Baptist as the last great prophet in the Old Testament line, even though he did not accept this description of himself or his ministry, saying only that his was a voice crying in the wilderness (John 1:9-23). The Baptist functioned in a way that clearly was prophetic, calling the people to repentance and pointing the way to the Messiah, Jesus.

For Catholic Christians, any portrait of prophets or prophecy must also include the time after the Old Testament and John the Baptist. For the Christ, the Messiah, has inaugurated a new age, the final age of this world. The gift of God's prophetic Spirit is proclaimed by Peter to have been bestowed upon the disciples at Pentecost (Acts 2:14-21) for the birth and growth of the Church. While the full extent of the exercise of prophecy in the early Christian Church is unknown to us, what is clear from the New Testament scriptures is that prophecy did function in the community. Thus, prophecy is named as a charism (or gift) of the Holy Spirit by Paul and he sets up regulations for the exercise of this gift (1 Corinthians 14:29-33).

Today, believers do not function as did Old Testament prophets and yet, by baptism, all Christians share in Christ's identity as priest, prophet, and king. As one rises from the baptismal waters, the Church prays: "God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, has freed you from sin and given you a new birth by water and the Holy Spirit, and welcomed you into his holy people. He now anoints you with the chrism of salvation. As Christ was anointed Priest, Prophet, and King, so may you live always as a member of his body, sharing everlasting life" (RBC 98).



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