

3rd Sunday of Advent (A)

15th December 2019

‘Scripture III: epistles’

Is 35: *the eyes of the blind shall be opened ... everlasting joy on their faces ...*

James 5: *be patient until the Lord’s coming*

Mt 11: 2–11: John heard what Christ was doing. ‘Are you the one who is to come?’

It’s *Gaudete* Sunday, and the opening antiphon for this Mass is “Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say, rejoice.” “Rejoice,” that’s the meaning of that Latin word “Gaudete.” Why do we rejoice, then? We rejoice, because Christmas is near: a week and a half away, the celebration of the birth of Our Saviour. Of course we rejoice ... Christmas is coming!

That phrase, “Rejoice in the Lord, always,” comes from St Paul, as does so much of our reflection on the Christian mystery. A quarter of the NT is composed of the Letters of St Paul, and they form the earliest writings in the NT, starting from the 50s of the 1st c. AD, only about 20yrs after Our Lord’s Crucifixion, Resurrection and Ascension. But they’re not the only ‘epistles’ in the NT. There are also letters to various people and communities of the early Church from SS Peter, James, John, & Jude, each in their different styles, and none of their letters anything like as detailed, or as long, or as thorough, as most of St Paul’s.

We almost always have an extract from one of these apostolic letters at Mass on Sunday, as the Second Reading. For most of the Church’s year, these Second Readings follow in a sequence quite unrelated to the First Readings and Gospel passages, which are usually thematically linked.

In Advent, so far, we’ve had extracts from St Paul’s *Letter to the Romans*, the longest of the epistles, and next Sunday too. The richness of St Paul’s legacy to us, his deep reflection on the mystery of Christ and of our living in Christ, is based on his own profound experience. St Paul, let’s not forget, was a Pharisee, highly educated in Jewish Law and practice, but in the beginning was also vehemently opposed to the ‘sect,’ as he saw it, of the ‘Nazarenes,’ the followers of Jesus. Given his dramatic conversion, his vision of the Risen Lord on the road to Damascus, no wonder he was able to bring together all his learning with an inside knowledge of the absolute truth of Jesus’s existence and His divinity. This explains the zealous way in which St Paul endeavours to communicate the Gospel — to the recipients of his letters then, and no less powerfully, today.

It happens that this Sunday it isn't from St Paul that we hear, however, but from St James. His one letter that survives in the NT is 5 chapters long, and is a very pastoral letter, easily readable, and accessible: lots of practical advice about how to live the faith, avoid temptation, care for the poor; how to make sure that faith is active in good works, controlling one's language, and promoting peace and unity. Towards the end of his letter, in ch. 5 he gives us wonderful evidence of the use of the Sacramental Anointing of the Sick in the Church of those earliest days. And it is also from ch.5 that we get our excerpt today (vv. 7–10): "*Be patient, ... until the Lord's coming ... You have to be patient; do not lose heart, because the Lord's coming will be soon!*" St James, as always, is keen to connect our faith in the Lord who came with our behaviour as we await the Lord who will come again. Advent is a time of waiting, of patience — of longing for Christmas, but also of making sense of that longing with dedicating this time as sacred to the Lord. The apostles and the writers of the epistles are keen to get across to us the reality of what they saw as they

experienced *first hand* the ministry of Jesus, the Son of God. Their advice to us as to how to live in these centuries of the Church — this time between Jesus's First Coming and His Second Coming — is better than any other advice. Living life with patience, with prayer, and with compassion, focussed on the reality of Jesus's coming and promise to come again — this is also St James's message coming through strongly in his letter: "*Be patient ... Do not lose heart ... Do not make complaints against one another ...*"

We have the remaining week and a half of Advent to offer to the Lord by way of prayer and praise — and the pink third candle, now lit, reminds us that we are half way through! Let's make our plans without fail as to how we are to keep these remaining days holy, and as a real gift of the heart to Christ. We have **Sunday Holy Hr** this afternoon; **Penitential Services** with Confession (Tues a.m. and p.m.); **Carol Service** (Sun 22nd at 5pm); and the all-important **Christmas Masses** of the 25th when we are duty-bound to come to Holy Mass. "*Remember,*" says St James, "*it is those who have endurance who are the blessed ones.*"