

Third Sunday of Advent Readings

Liturgical Context: Gaudete Sunday

The Third Sunday of Advent is distinct because the penitential mood of Advent shifts temporarily to joy. The entrance antiphon for the day begins with *Gaudete in Domino semper* ("Rejoice in the Lord always"). The vestments change from purple to rose to symbolize the nearness of the Lord.

Commentary on the Readings

First Reading: Isaiah 35:1-6a, 10

The Prophet Isaiah is addressing the Israelites who are in a state of exile or threat. He uses the imagery of nature to describe the coming salvation of God. A "desert" and "parched land" represent a life without God—dry, lifeless, and frightening. The prophecy promises that when God comes, this barren wasteland will bloom.

The key to this passage is the physicality of healing. Isaiah does not promise merely a change of mind, but a change of reality: "Strengthen the hands... make firm the knees." He predicts specific miracles that will identify the Messiah: the blind seeing, the deaf hearing, and the lame leaping. This is a vision of the restoration of Eden, where sorrow flees and is replaced by "everlasting joy."

Second Reading: James 5:7-10

St. James provides the practical disposition required for Advent: **Patience**. He uses the analogy of a farmer. A farmer cannot force a crop to grow by pulling on the shoots; he must wait for the "early and late rains." The "early rain" (autumn) was for planting, and the "late rain" (spring) was for maturing the crop.

James connects this agricultural patience to the spiritual life. We must make our "hearts firm" because the return of the Lord is near. He also warns against "complaining," which destroys community unity. Patience is not passive; it is an active endurance, modeled after the prophets who suffered yet remained faithful.

Gospel: Matthew 11:2-11

We find John the Baptist in a dark moment. He is languishing in Herod's prison. John had preached a Messiah of fire, judgment, and the axe lying at the root of the tree. Yet, he hears that Jesus is preaching mercy, eating with sinners, and healing the sick. This does not look like the military conquest or immediate judgment John might have expected.

John sends his disciples to ask, "*Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?*"

Jesus does not answer with a simple "Yes." Instead, He points to the evidence. He performs the very signs Isaiah prophesied in the First Reading. Finally, Jesus praises John as the greatest of the Old Covenant prophets ("born of women") but notes the radical newness of the Kingdom of Heaven. Those born into the New Covenant (through Baptism and the Holy Spirit) possess a spiritual dignity and closeness to God that even the great prophets of old could only long for.

Connections: Isaiah and the Gospel

The connection between the First Reading and the Gospel is one of **Prophecy and Fulfillment**.

1. The Checklist of the Messiah:

In the First Reading, Isaiah explicitly lists the signs that will accompany the coming of God:

- *Isaiah*: "The eyes of the blind be opened."
- *Isaiah*: "The ears of the deaf be cleared."
- *Isaiah*: "The lame leap like a stag."
- *Isaiah*: "The tongue of the mute will sing."

In the Gospel, Jesus uses this exact list to validate His identity to John's disciples:

- *Jesus*: "The blind regain their sight."
- *Jesus*: "The lame walk."
- *Jesus*: "The deaf hear."

Jesus is telling John: "I am the God Isaiah spoke about. The bloom in the desert is happening now."

2. The Nature of Victory:

John the Baptist may have expected a Messiah who would overthrow the Romans and bring divine retribution immediately (Isaiah speaks of "vindication" and "recompense"). However, Jesus reinterprets Isaiah's vindication. God's vengeance against evil is not found in destroying Roman soldiers, but in destroying sickness, death, and the effects of sin. The "recompense" is the healing of human nature.

Discussion Questions

1. **On Expectations vs. Reality:** John the Baptist had a specific idea of what the Messiah would do, and Jesus surprised him. Have you ever prayed for God to intervene in your life, but He answered in a way completely different from what you expected? How did you handle that "different" answer?
2. **On Christian Patience:** St. James compares the Christian life to a farmer waiting for rain. In our modern culture of instant gratification (fast food, instant messaging, same-day delivery), how can we practice "spiritual patience"? What are we waiting for God to "grow" in our lives right now?
3. **On Joyful Witness:** Jesus says, "Blessed is the one who takes no offense at me." Sometimes, the mercy of God offends people who want stricter justice. How can we, as Catholics, better reflect the *joyful* healing Jesus describes (sight to the blind, good news to the poor) rather than just being known for what we are against?

Take-Aways & Action Items

1. The "Gaudete" Check-in:

Since this is "Rejoice" Sunday, do an emotional audit of your faith. Do you view your Catholicism primarily as a set of rules and burdens, or as a source of joy?

- *Action:* Do something specifically to celebrate this Sunday—have a special meal, listen to beautiful music, or light the rose candle and pray a prayer of thanksgiving, listing five things you are grateful for.

2. Strengthen the Feeble Knees:

Isaiah commands us to "Strengthen the hands that are feeble... say to those whose hearts are frightened: Be strong, fear not!"

- *Action:* Identify one person in your life who is struggling, lonely, or afraid (the "feeble knees"). Reach out to them this week not with advice, but with encouragement. Send a text, make a call, or write a card simply to remind them they are loved and that God is with them.

3. Imitate the Works of Christ:

Jesus proved He was the Messiah by what He did (healed, proclaimed good news to the poor).

- *Action:* Perform one corporal work of mercy before Christmas. This could be donating to a food bank ("giving food to the hungry"), visiting a nursing home ("visiting the imprisoned/sick"), or forgiving someone who has annoyed you (spiritual healing). Make the Gospel concrete in your actions.