

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

The Anointed One

Of all the great figures of the Old Testament, none is more fascinating or more inspiring than the unnamed figure of *the Messiah* - in Greek, *the Christ* - in English, *the Anointed One*. Unnamed, in the sense of unidentified: but not without titles to denote him and describe him.

Unknown To You, He Is Among You

If we read the first reading today, we hear the description of the Christ by the third Isaiah (the one who addressed the returned exiles). He speaks of one who brings the poor good news, who heals broken hearts, a liberator who opens prison doors, a messenger of God's favour. Then he gives us a lyrical taste of the good news: that the messenger exults in God, who has wrapped him in the garments of salvation, robed him with integrity, *like a bridegroom crowned with his wreath, like a bride decked in jewels*. The image is very powerful: it has an integrity, a wholeness and harmony of character, not sober, restrained, bible-black: but exuberant, glittering, almost intoxicated with joy. The nuptial image is eloquent, because the joy of a wedding is joy in being who we are, *because we are loved in ourselves, and love each other in return*. Thus the flowers and jewels, a stunning display in the winter light of Advent. Here we are, as the winter takes hold, talking about fresh things growing, seeds springing up. The Magnificat, the great exultant hymn of springtime, is the perfect vehicle for our response.

Perfect And Holy

Paul takes up the theme, speaking of an unquenchable happiness which seems to have preservative qualities: it leads to a constant stream of prayer, leaping up like the fountain of living water of which Jesus spoke, which guides us to keep the good and avoid the evil we meet, which keeps us *safe and blameless* in spirit, soul and body until the Lord comes. Perfection and holiness are great concepts, which we sometimes shelve as impossible dreams. But then Advent is about something new happening, a rebirth of hopes deadened by bitter experiences. We need to disinter much that we have buried in despondency, if the miracle is to be possible for God; we have it in our power, like all children, to frustrate the most loving hopes of our Father, by clinging to our despair rather than trusting his promise. The words should stay with us: *Never try to suppress the Spirit, or treat the gift of prophecy with contempt!* I cannot excuse myself of that, as long as

I remain closed to the thought that these prophecies might come true in my own real life, this Advent.

A Witness To Speak For The Light

Prophets of joy are, for the most part, given a rough response, perhaps even worse than that accorded to prophets of doom. Our faces have become endemically sardonic, and we are a little better at acid than at honey. This day is called *Gaudete* Sunday; the word is an imperative, and commands us to *rejoice*. This commandment comes with the full force of the Scriptures, and the full tradition of the Church. The prophets, the evangelists, the blessed Virgin all unite in it. Above all of them is the voice of the Messiah himself, the Lord of the Sabbath, the Bridegroom, as he stands at the lectern in the synagogue, and searches out the words of Isaiah to read to his own townspeople: our first reading today was his first reading to them at Nazareth. We can say that, whatever Isaiah thought he was saying when he wrote it, it meant more than that when Jesus read it out in his own voice.

What The Prophet Meant

His preaching afterwards was quite simple, but the most demanding of all: *These words are being fulfilled now, today, even as you hear them*. If we re-read the words of Isaiah, and tell ourself the same thing, we will be confronted with the same choice they faced, and I daresay we may react as they did: initially, by saying: *How beautiful...* but then with: *Says who?* The claim of the reading is very clear: *The Lord has anointed me....* Jesus is himself laying claim to be the Christ - and therefore to have the power to say what the Scriptures mean. Because the Messiah would be the ultimate fulfilment of God's promises, he is "your only Teacher" as to what the promises of God mean. He was inviting his townsfolk to believe in him as the Christ, and to enter into the period of fulfilment with him. That was the invitation they would definitively turn down. We must be sure, as we prepare for another Christmas, that we do not imitate them.
Fr Philip