

Sunday 15th December 2019

Advent 3

Purple



Collect

O Lord Jesus Christ, who at your first coming sent your messenger to prepare your way before you: grant that the ministers and stewards of your mysteries may likewise so prepare and make ready your way by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, that at your second coming to judge the world we may be found an acceptable people in your sight; for you are alive and reign with the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen**

Isaiah 35:1-10 English Standard Version (ESV)

The Ransomed Shall Return

35¹ The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus; ² it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God. ³ Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. ⁴ Say to those who have an anxious heart, “Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.” ⁵ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; ⁶ then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; ⁷ the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; in the haunt of jackals, where they lie down, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. ⁸ And a highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Way of Holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it. It shall belong to those who walk on the way; even if they are fools, they shall not go astray.^[a] ⁹ No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. ¹⁰ And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Footnotes: a. or *if they are fools, they shall not wander in it*

COMMENT: Isaiah 34 and 35 belong together and “probably appeared together at the beginning of the great postexilic composite prophecy, chapters 40-66. This latter segment (ch. 35) envisions God’s people rescued from exile and returned to their fruitful homeland

along a holy way joyfully singing of God's new creation. The description of the new creation contrasts the dry wilderness and burning desert with the luxuriance of Lebanon, Carmel and Sharon. In modern Israel as in the 6th century BC when the poet wrote these lines, these areas are the most productive because they have the most abundant rainfall and natural water supply. The majestic peak and foothills of Mount Lebanon, the coastal ridge of Mount Carmel and the seaside plain of Sharon catch virtually all the rainfall borne in on winter storms from the north and west. The rest of Israel is very dry and productive only through constant irrigation from deep wells, the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan River. Modern Israel has made the desert bloom as verse 1 of this passage prophesied. This poet repeats this vision again and again (verses 1, 6, 7). The poem has a definite messianic tone to it. One hears echoes of this again in 61:1 and in Matthew 11:5. The safe highway for the homeward journey of verse 8, compares with Isaiah 40:3. The ransomed exiles will return to Zion singing joyful praises because the sorrows and sighing of Psalm 137 have vanished. (Cf. Revelation. 7:17; 21:4) While the poem gives voice to a deep faith, it leaves salvation entirely in the hands of the transcendent God who is beyond as well as active within creation and history. For Christians the promise has been fulfilled in the incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth. As Paul said, Jesus is the beginning of the new creation through whom God provides the means for re-creation of the whole universe (2 Cor. 5:16-21; Col. 1:15-20). From Isaiah 35 we learn that God loves and longs to restore all of creation. To implement this love becomes our responsibility as those who believe in and follow Jesus, the Messiah/Christ.

Matthew 11:2-11 English Standard Version (ESV)

Messengers from John the Baptist

11 ²Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples ³and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" ⁴And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers^[a] are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. ⁶And blessed is the one who is not offended by me." ⁷As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸What then did you go out to see? A man^[b] dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. ⁹What then did you go out to see? A prophet?^[c] Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰This is he of whom it is written, "'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.'" ¹¹Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Footnotes: a. *Leprosy* was a term for several skin diseases; see Leviticus 13. b. or *Why then did you go out? To see a man...* c. some manuscripts *Why then did you go out? To see a prophet?*

COMMENT: The names we have given to the two parts of our Christian Bible, Old and New Testaments, recognised both the continuity and discontinuity of Christianity and Judaism. John the Baptist represented the transition between the two. John, expecting judgment, not healing, sent his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the Messiah?” Jesus pointed to actions that Isaiah anticipated for the Coming One and asked people to tell John what they see and hear. If the current scholarly consensus is correct, Matthew’s Gospel was written for a community which included both Jews and Gentiles. Apparently one of their conflicts concerned the character of the Messiah. Just as there are those in our modern congregations who question whether and how Jesus could be “Christ, the Son of God, Saviour,” so also there were then. In this passage John the Baptist and his disciples represent that element who struggle to believe. Then as now, actions rather than words carry conviction. Seeing the things that were actually happening as a result of Jesus’ ministry was the proof Jesus offered to reassure John about the continuing mission, and that his labour had not been in vain. At the same time, Jesus took the opportunity arising from this exchange with John’s disciples to differentiate his ministry from that of John. He was not denigrating what John had done in calling Israel to repentance. Rather he used his ambiguous statement that John was the greatest man who ever lived yet least in the kingdom of heaven to point out that it was he, Jesus of Nazareth, who had come to inaugurate that kingdom. As those who have experienced it known all too well, repentance and forgiveness only begin the process of living fully under the reign of God’s redeeming love in Jesus Christ.

Psalm 146 *Lauda, anima mea* Grail Psalter

℟ Come, Lord, and save us.

¹ Alleluia!

My soul, give praise to the Lord;

² I will praise the Lord all my days,
make music to my God while I live. **℟**

³ Put no trust in princes,
In mortal men in whom there is no help.

⁴ Take their breath, they return to clay
and their plans that day come to nothing. **℟**

⁵ He is happy who is helped by Jacob’s God,
whose hope is in the Lord his God,

⁶ who alone made heaven and earth,
the seas and all they contain. **℟**

It is he who keeps faith for ever,
⁷ who is just to those who are oppressed.

It is he who gives bread to the hungry,
the Lord, who sets prisoners free, **℟**

⁸ the Lord who gives sight to the blind,
who raises up those who are bowed down,
⁹ the Lord, who protects the stranger
and upholds the widow and orphan.

✠ Come, Lord, and save us.

^{8c} It is the Lord who loves the just
^{9c} but thwarts the path of the wicked.

¹⁰ The Lord will reign for ever,
Zion's God, from age to age. Alleluia! **✠**

**Glory be to the Father and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit,
As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.**

COMMENT: The prophetic theme of hope of restoration sounds through the latter part of this song of praise, one of five psalms that end the Psalter. It sings the praise of the LORD as creator and redeemer, especially of those who are powerless and marginalised. Verses 7b-9 repeats the name of the LORD five times, always translated “the Lord.” Originally the name ‘Yahweh’ would have been voiced, but the name of God became considered so sacred, that it was replaced by the title “Lord” rendered “LORD” in English bibles to show the divine name lies behind the replacement. One can imagine those familiar with the words joining their voices to the cantor in a jubilant crescendo as the divine name was recited. Then in the closing benediction proclaiming the eternal sovereignty of the LORD, the congregation responds with a final outburst of praise.

Short Preface

And now we give you thanks because you sent him to redeem us from sin and death and to make us inheritors of everlasting life; that when he shall come again in power and great triumph to judge the world, we may with joy behold his appearing, and in confidence may stand before him.

Post Communion

We give you thanks, O Lord, for these heavenly gifts; kindle in us the fire of your Spirit that when your Christ comes again we may shine as lights before his face; who is alive and reigns now and for ever. **Amen**

Blessing

Christ the Sun of Righteousness shine upon you, scatter the darkness from before your path, and make you ready to meet him when he comes in glory; and the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be among you, and remain with you always. **Amen.**