

## SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

READING I Is 40:1-5, 9-11

READING II 2 Pt 3:8-14

GOSPEL Mk 1:1-8

Is 40:1 marks the beginning of the message of Second Isaiah, an anonymous prophet of the exile. Preaching around 540 B.C., he stresses the dimension of hope for his depressed countrymen. The opening verse strikes this hopeful note effectively in the setting of the heavenly council. Conferring with his advisors, the Lord calls for a crusade of comfort and consolation. A new period is now unfolding: the punishment is over; the sin is forgiven. Vv. 3-5 takes the form of a march through the desert which combines the Exodus experience with the pagan procession of the Babylonian temple. The Lord will now lead his people out of Babylon, across the desert, and to their own land. This desert highway will attest to God's presence ("glory") and provoke expressions of amazement from the people.

In vv. 9-11, Zion/Jerusalem proclaims the Good News that the Lord is present, and that fear is out of place. In ancient Near Eastern thought, "shepherd" is a typical image of the king. This shepherd, however, demonstrates an attitude of comfort and consolation, namely, "carrying them in his bosom, and leading the ewes with care" (v 11).

Writing perhaps as late as 125 A.D., the author of Second Peter appeals from Rome to his audience in the general area of northern Asia Minor. Certain members of the Christian community there were disparaging belief in the Parousia and indulging in promiscuity. Borrowing from Ps 90:4, the author points out that God's ways differ dramatically from our own. God's delay of the Parousia shows his patience and concern for the salvation of all. However, when it does come, it will be sudden and unpredictable. This ushering in of the end time (expressed in apocalyptic language) should actually lead to lives of holiness and godliness. Indeed, a holy life hastens the Day of the Lord. Finally, from the collapse of the old order, there will emerge a new creation. All the more reason, therefore, to be unstained and unspotted.

The introduction of Mark's Gospel indicates that the preaching of the Good News begins with the mission of the Baptist. V. 2 actually cites the "messenger" (Mal 3:1), who is later identified as Elijah. Both the Baptist's clothing and diet reflect the Elijah image (see 2 Kgs 1:6, 8). Unlike Is 40:3, the voice cries out in the desert. But like Is 40:3, the Baptist announces God's unexpected plan of salvation unfolding in the desert.

John's mission involves a radical conversion ("repentance") which then leads to an outward expression in baptism. Unlike Mt. and Lk., Mark omits the summary of the Baptist's ethical preaching to bring focus to his status as precursor. It is likely that John

regarded Jesus' preaching as one of imminent judgment. Although in Mark, the Baptist does not preach judgment.

Prophets provoke presence. We hear the word 'prophet' but limit it to a few extraordinary people. We note the term 'provoke' but cannot conceive of ourselves as catalysts. We learn of God's 'presence' but never regard ourselves as indicators of that presence. Yet through baptism we are commissioned to be the spokespersons/discoverers of God's presence because prophets provoke presence.

The audience of Second Isaiah had ceased yearning for God's presence. They had given themselves over to despair and discouragement. Yet the prophet's experience was to discover the presence of the Lord in the very midst of their depression. His message of comfort and consolation alerted people to long forgotten dimensions of their God. His image of the tender shepherd reawakened old dreams. Prophets provoke presence.

The Baptist sensed God's presence in the person of Jesus. He understood his mission in terms of precursor. He would prepare the people for the arrival of the more powerful one by his proclamation of radical conversion. He would demonstrate the seriousness of his intent by appearing in the guise of Elijah. He would emphasize the centrality of Jesus by limiting his view of himself to that of herald. Prophets provoke presence.

Husbands and wives who continue to foster their mutual love by service exercise a prophetic mission. All workers, whether married or single, who are bent upon comforting and consoling the distraught and distressed of their world, carry out a prophetic task. The sick and the dying, who patiently accept the frustration and agony of their condition, perform a prophetic work. Leaders who stress the centrality of Jesus, rather than their own importance, engage in a prophetic undertaking. All such people exploit God's presence for others. They are the heirs of Second Isaiah and the Baptist, for they, too, are prophets who provoke God's presence.

Eucharist addresses a prophetic community. Eucharist recalls the message of Jesus, who witnessed to his Father's presence in suffering and death. Eucharist thereby challenges the community to uncover and discover God's presence in each other. Eucharist offers strength whereby prophets provoke presence.