

## THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT – B

READING I Is 61:1-2a, 10-11

READING II 1 Thes 5:16-24

GOSPEL Jn 1:6-8, 19-28

Third Isaiah is either an individual prophet or a school of prophets in the painful period following the return of the exiles (perhaps around 500 B.C.). The prophet experiences the impact of God's spirit and breaks out into song. He is aware of his messianic ("anointed") mission to preach. In this awareness, he finds strength in exercising that mission. The recipients of his mission are the depressed post-exilic community. This community of prisoners/captives learn that their sentence is over. The jubilee year, a time when God repairs the injury suffered by his people, has arrived. The final verses capture the exultation of the renewed marriage relationship between Yahweh and Jerusalem. This renewal is revealed in the wardrobe of salvation and the jewelry of exoneration. Just as the earth/garden brings forth foliage and vegetation, the Lord will bring about vindication before the Gentiles.

In Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians in 51 A.D., all but the last two verses of this selection are a list of admonitions for the community. Verse 18b indicates that it is God's will that the Thessalonians lead a life of ongoing joy, prayerfulness, and gratitude. In vv 19-22 Paul refers to the charismatic concerns of the community. Therefore, they are to provide freedom for the charismatics ("do not stifle") and not disparage prophecies. Their general approach should be to test everything and retain the morally good. In the final verses, Paul blesses the community: Trusting that God will sanctify them on every level. While the ethical demands of the Parousia (the Second Coming) are considerable, the community should note that God always accomplishes what he sets out to do.

The opening lines in the gospel are an editor's insertion into the prologue to explain the role of John the Baptist. John is to witness to the light. As such he enjoys a subordinate role in relation to Jesus.

There are two sets of interrogations. In the first set (vv 19-23), the Baptist responds negatively, rejecting identification with the traditional figures of the end time, namely, the Messiah, Elijah, and the Prophet. He responds positively by identifying himself as the herald of Is 40:3, in terms of the one who is to come. In the second set of interrogations (vv 24-27), the priests and Levites seek the Baptist's reason for baptizing. John replies that he baptizes with water only. He also refers to the hidden Messiah ("whom you do not recognize"). The Messiah's presence would be unknown until he suddenly appears among his people. The Baptist defends his practice of baptizing as a means of preparing for the one to come.

Our identification is in other people. We identify ourselves by first name and family name: we find it hard to include others not of our own family. We mention the degrees we have earned and the salary we make: we find it difficult to see others as the beneficiaries of our talents and income. We proffer our accomplishments and our status: we find it almost impossible to view others as the focus of our accomplishments and status. Yet our identification is in other people.

The unknown prophet, Third Isaiah, identified himself in terms of his community. He experienced a

call, an anointing. But that event meant others, especially the neglected: the brokenhearted, the captives, the prisoners. He saw fulfillment only in terms of proclaiming Good News to those neglected. The spirit he had received moved him in the direction of others. Our identification is in other people.

The Baptist experienced no identity crisis. He existed for Jesus and, through Jesus, for everyone. He rejected the titles of Messiah, Elijah, and the Prophet, only to settle for the designation "herald," thereby identifying in terms of the one who sent him and the ones for whom he was sent. Even the notoriety attached to his baptizing was other-oriented. It was a preparatory step and set the stage for the greater one. By being a witness to the light, the Baptist demonstrated that our identification is in other people.

Parents who seek fulfillment in serving their family understand Christian identity. Professional people who find their promotion in promoting the good of others reflect a Christian theology of titles. Leaders, both civil and ecclesiastical, who look to the concern of their constituents indicate a Christian approach to status. All who choose to ask about and be concerned about others have no identity crisis. Such people recognize that our identification is in other people.

Eucharist captures the lifestyle of the man who came not to be served but to serve. Eucharist presents Jesus' dying as our way of living for others. Eucharist insists that only those who find their identity in others truly participate in liturgy. Eucharist thereby proclaims that our identification is in other people.