

Sunday December 5, 2021

Second Week of Advent

Parishioner Reflection

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The opening lines of Handel's *Messiah* contains some of the words from today's gospel. These words appear with some slight variations in Handel's *Messiah* since the oratorio was written in 1742 (<http://opera.stanford.edu/iu/libretti/messiah.htm>). They are:

The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

Some of you may be planning on going to hear the *Messiah* performed locally in the next few weeks. The fact that it is performed so widely at least in the GTA and Toronto, even in our secular society, may have led you to wonder sometimes why it is such an enduring piece of music. Might it be that it speaks of comfort and joy in a world where there can be precious little of those things? Not to mention that it also refers to God's coming salvation that "all flesh shall see" (Luke 3:1-6).

The gospel words found in the *Messiah* are a quote from Isaiah 40:3-5. Some of them appear, again, in a slightly altered form, as well, in today's first reading from Baruch. According to The Oxford Annotated Bible 3rd Edition, Baruch takes place in the period when Israel was exiled in Babylon. Baruch 5:1-9 is about the "Glorification of Jerusalem and return of the exiles" (ed. Coogan, The Oxford Annotated Bible, 3rd Edition, 176 Apocrypha and Note on 5:1-9, 183 Apocrypha). Imagine what these words probably meant to Jewish people thinking back to the Babylonian exile and how God smoothed the way for them to return from captivity to their own homeland. In fact, God seems to be caught up in their happiness at this because it says here that he leads them with "joy" (Baruch, 5:9). This theme of "joy" is taken up again in today's Psalm.

Notice how many times "joy" and the related word "rejoiced" occurs in the Psalm. All together they occur 6 times. And so does "laughter". The contrasting words "weeping" and "tears" appear, as well, but, just once each. The psalm, like the passage from Baruch, is also about God restoring Israel's fortunes. In the situation, for the people of Israel, their "restoration" was like being in a "dream"; and it was joyous.

After the thrilling emotion of the Psalm, the Gospel appears to begin very prosaically. We are suddenly brought down to earth with what seems to be a very dry list of rulers who were ruling

at the time that God's word came to "John the Son of Zechariah", that is, John the Baptist in the "wilderness". Isaiah 40:3-5, as was already mentioned above, is being quoted in Luke 3:4-6. Isaiah is, as in the first reading and the psalm, making reference to a path being made so that Israel can return from exile. But, in Luke 3:1-6 these verses are applied to John the Baptist (ed. Coogan, The New Oxford Annotated Bible, 3rd Edition, 1031 Hebrew Bible). Just think how the Jewish readers of the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which all have this passage, would have felt when they read these verses from Isaiah about John the Baptist. It likely would have called to mind the joy that the Israelites would have felt when God brought them out of Egypt and later out of Babylon. Here was another situation, in their own day, when it was being proclaimed in the gospels that God had prepared a way through "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 3:3). And it is this same message that continues to be proclaimed today by our lector in your hearing. But this time it is for more than just ancient Israel it is for you, for us and for the whole world, tidings of comfort and joy.