



The Word was God

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The Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales have dedicated 2020 to be a year of focus on the Bible and 'The God Who Speaks'. The prologue from John's Gospel is read on Christmas day and famously speaks about 'the Word', and so we will be using these weeks of Advent, which begin the Year of the Word, to prepare to hear John's familiar text in a new way. How do the scriptures for the Sundays of Advent invite us to a deeper engagement with what John will tell us about 'the Word' on Christmas day? The readings for Gaudete Sunday can refresh us in this time of waiting by reminding us, through their examples of unexpected joy, that we can find God, and what is of God, in the joyful surprises of our lives, suggests Nicholas King SJ.

How, in this period of waiting for the coming, and in this Year of the Word, do we identify the Word of God that is speaking to us? The readings for the third Sunday of Advent offer a suggestion for they invite us to find joy in quite unexpected places and so encounter our God.

The first reading¹ – addressed to the Israelite exiles in Babylon, whom God (and the prophet) are encouraging to make the enormous and daunting journey back across the desert to Jerusalem – starts by simply asserting, 'the desert shall rejoice'. Then it continues, going deeper into the mystery: 'the parched land shall exult and bloom; they shall bloom with abundant flowers', which is not what you would expect of your average Near Eastern desert. But that is what our unexpected God does year after year, and the poet underlines the message by picturing the loveliest and most fertile (least desert-like) parts of their homeland – Lebanon, Carmel and Sharon; and he invites his audience to be astonished at what will happen to the desert places: 'they shall see the glory of the Lord, and the splendour of our God'. The unexpectedness continues: 'strengthen the hands that are feeble, and the weak knees, make them strong'. This he follows up with a wonderful song: 'Look! Your God comes with vindication...then the eyes of the blind shall be



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opened, the ears of the deaf shall be cleared, the lame shall leap like a stag, the tongue of the speechless shall sing ... those ransomed by the Lord shall come back to Sion in song, and with everlasting joy'. The unexpectedness of all this joy simply seizes us as we listen.

The psalm for this third Sunday is an ecstatically joyful poem about what God does, expressed (at least in English) in a series of relative clauses:

'the one who keeps faith for ever, who does justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the starving'. Then, in case we had forgotten who we are talking about, the poet-prophet five times mentions the sacred name, 'the Lord', describing this unexpected God as 'the Lord who sets prisoners free', who 'gives sight to the blind', 'lifts up those who are bowed down', 'loves the righteous', 'looks after the immigrant', 'looks after the orphan and the widow'. Then, as we reflect that these are not at all the people whom we might expect God to view with favour, since most of them would not be allowed into the Temple when they finally made it back to Sion, the psalm ends in exultant celebration, lifting us up with its wholly unexpected joy: 'the Lord will reign for ever – your God, Sion, from generation to generation. Praise the Lord!'

The tone of the second reading² for this Sunday is slightly less exuberant; there is still joy detectable below the surface, but the keynote, played no less than five times, is 'patience'. The point here is that, unexpected though it may seem, God is coming; and this joyful news is expressed in terms of a willingness to wait for 'the coming of the Lord'. This is illustrated by a reference to the patience of farmers, 'waiting for the precious fruit of the land', something with which James's readers will have been entirely familiar, right down to the joy when the harvest is finally reaped. But waiting for it is tough, and depends on the 'early and late rain'; so James's listeners are exhorted to 'strengthen your hearts, because the Lord's coming has drawn near'. If this inclines them to raise a disbelieving eyebrow, they are in the same place as those to whom our first reading was addressed. The 'Lord's coming' is mentioned twice, and then, to bolt the lesson home, he insists that 'the Judge is standing before the doors'. What they now have to do is to 'follow the example of the patience of the ... prophets who spoke in the Lord's name'. And that will lead to joy.

Certainly John the Baptist does not appear to be expecting much in the way of joy in today's gospel reading.³ He is in prison, and very far from convinced that Jesus is indeed 'the Coming One'. So he has to be told what is going on; and, once again, it is unexpectedly joyful news: 'blind people are recovering their sight, the lame are walking, the lepers are being cleansed, the deaf are hearing, the dead are being raised, and the destitute are being given the good news'. The alert reader will recall that all this echoes what Jesus had said in his mission-statement in the synagogue in Nazareth, and recognise that the prophecy is now being fulfilled. There is also, of course, a warning to John the Baptist (and to us): 'congratulations to those who are not scandalised by me'.

As John's emissaries make their way back to his prison, to report on the encounter, we now listen to Jesus reflecting to the crowds on the joyful unexpectedness of the Baptist: 'What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed, shaken by the wind?' The answer to this last question is presumably 'no', for he continues: 'In that case, what did you go out to see?' He offers something a bit more predictable, a celebrity such as you might see in the popular media: 'someone clothed in the latest fashions [well, 'soft clothes', in a literal translation]? Look! Those in the latest fashions are in emperors' houses.' Then he continues, insistently, 'No? So what *did* you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I'm telling you, and something bigger than a prophet'. Then he quotes Exodus, using a quotation that our evangelist, Matthew, had found in Mark: 'Look! I am sending my messenger before your presence, who is going to prepare my way before me'. But there is no end to the unexpectedness, it seems, for he continues: 'Amen I'm telling you – no one has been raised up among those born of women who was greater than John the Baptist'. We pause and make note of this very strong statement, and then we are given even stronger medicine: 'But the one of least significance in the Kingdom of the Heavens is more important than him'. Presumably this refers to us, and that is very surprising. But it is also remarkably good news.

The answer, then, to our question about how to identify the presence of God is this: our task, on this Gaudete Sunday, and all this week, is to look out for those joyful surprises that signal the presence of the Almighty. They are there, if you will just open your eyes in joy.

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¹ Isaiah 35:1-6,10

² James 5:7-10

³ Matthew 11:2-11