

INTRODUCTION

At this time of the year, we always have a special appeal for the retirement for religious. We are happy to have Sister Sebastien with us today and she will talk at the end of Mass. So my introduction and homily will be short today.

The prophet Isaiah lived during a very troubling time in Israel. During his lifetime the Assyrians annihilated all of the area north of Jerusalem, known as the northern kingdom. Jerusalem lived in fear and trembling that they would be next. Isaiah was not sparing in his condemnation of those who contributed to all that suffering. He condemned not only the Assyrians, but also the kings of Israel who led the people away from God and he condemned the people who followed their lead. In today's first reading he gives hope to those who have remained faithful to God. He promises them God would send them a leader who would lead his people to justice and peace.

HOMILY

I want to begin with a little prayer you can reflect on while you are standing in line at the Post Office, sorting your cards and juggling your packages: "God, our Father, may everything we do be first-class. Imprint your own loving zip code upon our hearts so that we may never go astray. Provide in your gracious Providence special handling for those of us who are fragile and keep us in one piece. And when our days draw to a close and we are marked 'Return to Sender,' be there to greet us at Heaven's door so that nobody may ever say 'Unknown at this address.' Amen."

Lest we get too wound up in all the sending and spending, John the Baptist is here to set us straight. He's a down to earth person who is reminding us of whom and what we are getting ready to celebrate. Three times in today's gospel John uses the word repent or repentance. When we hear that word we often think of some terrible sinner who

needs a total makeover spiritually. Lest we think the gospel does not apply to us, we need to listen to today's second reading from St. Paul: "Whatever was written previously was written for *our* instruction that by endurance and by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."

In other words the word "repent" is meant for all of us, not just for the really bad people. The Greek word for repent means literally to change our mind. If we know we haven't been as good as we or God would like us to be, we do something about it, we decide to make a change. It could be our behavior that needs to be changed or it could be our attitude. Or it could be we're not doing anything too bad, but we're not doing anything really good either. The Baptist said "every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down." It's not enough to avoid evil, we have to do good.

It's part of normal conversation around this time to ask "Are you ready for Christmas?" Wouldn't we be surprised if we asked someone that question and they answered: "I still need to get into better shape spiritually." The media is working hard telling us how to get ready for Christmas. In all our preparations, let us listen also to John the Baptist, the herald God sent to tell us how He wants us to prepare for His coming. Amen.

3rd Sunday of Advent - A Cycle

December 12, 2004

INTRODUCTION

In today's first reading, the prophet Isaiah is speaking to a people in exile, promising them restoration. Their return home would be like a return to paradise. The vision of Isaiah goes beyond its historical context. It anticipates the kingdom of God that the Messiah would establish. The passage prepares us for the gospel when the disciples of John the Baptist ask Jesus whether he is the Messiah who will establish God's kingdom. Jesus points to his miracles as the answer to their question, miracles that describe the wonderful things Isaiah promises. Even though our Messiah and Savior has come, we must wait patiently for God's plan to come to complete fulfillment, St. James tells us in today's second reading.

HOMILY

A man was arrested a couple of weeks before Christmas and brought before the judge. When the judge asked the man what he was charged with, he answered “doing my Christmas shopping early.” The judge replied, “that’s not an offense. How early were you doing this shopping?” The man answered, “before the store opened.”

That has nothing to do with the theme of today’s readings, except that today is Gaudete Sunday, so I thought it would be good to start off the homily with a smile.

John the Baptist was in prison. John got in trouble with the king for condemning the king’s immoral life style. While in prison John sent his disciples to Jesus to ask “are you the one who is to come?” In other words, “are you the Messiah, the Savior, the one who is to establish the kingdom of God in our land, or are we still waiting for someone else?” Jesus’ answer was not just a lot of words, but evidence that he was the awaited one. The miracles Jesus worked fit the description of the prophets, especially Isaiah whom we heard in today’s first reading, that he was the one.

What was the point of John’s question? John had leapt with joy within his mother Elizabeth when Mary came to visit. John had pointed Jesus out as the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Why ask now “are you he who is to come?”

There are two possible explanations as to why John asked this question. We just heard Isaiah: “...with divine recompense, he comes to save you.” Prisons in those days were terrible places to be. Perhaps John was feeling pretty discouraged, locked up as he was, possibly contemplating his own martyrdom. John could have been asking in effect, “if you are the Messiah and you’ve come to establish God’s kingdom, where is it?” “If you’ve come to ‘proclaim liberty to captives,’ (to quote Isaiah), to set God’s people free, what am I doing here in prison?” It’s a question people still ask today when they are suffering, especially when they’ve tried to do all that they knew God wanted them to do. Why do good people suffer? Why was the Baptist in prison if Jesus had come to save? Was John discouraged, was he losing faith or hope? We don’t know.

Some scholars suggest another reason why John may have sent his disciples to ask that question of Jesus: “are you he who is to come?” Those other scholars suggest that possibly John sent his disciples so they would discover for themselves that

Jesus was the Messiah. John had already pointed Jesus out to them, but now he wanted to convince them further. It's a good possibility that was John's purpose.

At any event, whether John's faith was getting weak or not, we all know how our own faith is tested when we believe and we pray and we try to do good and life slaps us in the face. The other day I was hearing confessions at Roger Bacon and one student asked me "why does God let people do bad things?" "Why doesn't he stop them or punish them?" I got the impression there were certain individuals that she thought God should really come down hard on. In the few minutes I had, I gave whatever answers I could, but she was asking one of the oldest and most profound questions in the history of the human race: why do good people suffer, and of course, why do others get by with murder?

There's no one good answer or even a combination of good answers that is totally satisfying. St. Peter in his second epistle gives us one good answer when he talks about God's patience. God is patient since "he wants none to perish but all to come to repentance." St. James too talks to us today about patience. Somehow the more things we have and the more conveniences we have, the more impatient we become when we have to wait for anything. When we want something, we want it now. It took 200 years to build Notre Dame in Paris. We put up great skyscrapers in just a few years. (It sometimes takes longer for the plans to get through a committee than it takes to build something). Patience takes faith, faith that something is when I don't see that it is, or faith that something will happen when I don't see it happening.

Jesus gave us evidence that the kingdom has arrived. But we need patience to wait for its completion. Patience forces us to deepen our faith and faith helps us to have patience. The fullness of the kingdom is still a beautiful promise, like the prophecy we heard from Isaiah, and we, like John in prison must keep believing that Jesus is the answer to that promise. He is more than an answer, he is the guarantee of that promise. Through the eyes of faith, we have this guarantee in the Eucharist we now celebrate. "He who is to come," comes to us now. We don't have to look for any other. In this faith we look forward to being able to celebrate his birth once again with the hope his birth gives us and that is our joy at this time. So as our liturgy on this Gaudete Sunday tells us: "let us rejoice."

Fourth Sunday of Advent – A Cycle

December 19, 2004

INTRODUCTION - Jerusalem was in turmoil seven hundred thirty years before Christ. So what's new? The political situation, then as now, was very

complex. The Assyrians were an especially cruel and powerful nation whose capital was located in modern day Iraq, about 250 miles north of Baghdad. Two nations near Jerusalem had already been conquered by the Assyrians and were under Assyrian rule. They planned to rebel and they wanted Ahaz, the king of Jerusalem, to join them in fighting Assyria. Ahaz didn't want to get involved with the two rebellious nations, so their kings decided to attack Jerusalem, depose Ahaz and set up a king who would be more cooperative. Ahaz then decided to call on Assyria for help. Isaiah said "Don't do it. The Lord would handle the situation and Ahaz would be safe." Ahaz wouldn't listen. You can imagine Isaiah almost shouting at the king "Ask for a sign, ask for some proof." But Ahaz already had his mind made up, so in an arrogant display of false piety he said he wouldn't tempt God by asking for a sign. Isaiah said "Well, you'll get one anyway!" The original sign, to be meaningful for Ahaz, would have to have been something meaningful for Ahaz, not something that would happen 730 years later. The sign for Ahaz would be that a son would be born to him who would succeed him as king. He would be called Emmanuel for he would be a sign that God was with his people. He would be a sign that the throne of Ahaz would be secure and Jerusalem would be safe. It is a good possibility that son was Hezekiah who turned out to be a good leader and a king who was faithful to God. But in the generations to follow, this promise of Isaiah began to be seen as the promise of the greatest king of all, the Messiah, born of a virgin and a sign to us that God is with us.

HOMILY - Both St. Matthew and St. Luke tell us about the unique nature of Jesus' conception. St. Luke tells us the story from Mary's perspective in the beautiful gospel of the Annunciation. We recently heard that gospel on the Holy Day, Dec. 8th. St. Matthew's gospel, which we just heard, tells the story as it was experienced by Joseph.

Mary, his wife to be, was with child and he was not the father. From the timetable St. Luke gave us, Mary left her home immediately after the Annunciation to visit her cousin. When she returned after three months, her pregnancy would have been obvious. Jewish law said that a wife who was unfaithful should be put to death. This would have applied to an engaged person too, for engagement in that culture was as binding as marriage. Marriage only gave the couple permission to begin living together. There are

so many questions we would love to ask. Was this a marriage that had been arranged by Mary's parents as was typical of those times, and when Joseph saw Mary was going to have a child, he decided to end the relationship. Or did Mary tell Joseph before or after the visitation to Elizabeth about the message of the angel and Joseph decided he was unworthy to be associated with this holy event? We do not know what led to Joseph's decision to quietly break off their engagement. But the angel changed his mind. The angel gave the same message to Joseph as was given to Mary at the Annunciation: Mary's child was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. As head of the family, Joseph would give Jesus his name, a Hebrew name which means "Yahweh saves." It is also Joseph who would give Jesus his social status. Jesus would belong to the house of David, a royal family. This is indicated by the way the angel greeted Joseph as "Joseph, son of David." Other than the claim to belong to a royal family, the royal house of David had possessed no vestige or appearance of royalty since the Babylonian exile 600 years earlier.

At this time of Advent, as we prepare to celebrate the birth of a child, the Church is reminding us of the exalted dignity of this child. Humanly speaking, he is born into a kingly family. But he is more than human. He is conceived not in the way the rest of us are, but by the Holy Spirit, thus he is Son of the Most High. Truly he is God with us and Yahweh who has come to save us. No wonder we celebrate.

Let us reflect on this name, Emmanuel, for a moment. St. Matthew tells us here, at the beginning of his gospel that Jesus' birth, in the fullest sense of the word, is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah. Jesus is God with us. If we go to the very end of St. Matthew's gospel, in the very last verse, as Jesus was ascending into heaven, he told his disciples: "Behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age."

God's desire is to be with us. He came to be with us in a unique way when Jesus was born. And he promised to be with us always. There's a lot we do not understand in life. With all the evil and suffering in our world, why would God want to be with us? We can answer that when we consider when one person wants to be with another, it is usually because of love. But that raises another question, why would God love us so? There's no answer to

that one until we get to heaven. But when we have problems or disasters in our lives, don't we wonder if God is really with us? We wonder if he is too busy paying attention to other matters or did he forget us? The only response to those doubts is to decide to believe he's telling us the truth when he says: "I am with you always." There's no easy way around the fact that we need to have lots of faith sometimes. And there's no easy way to have faith except to take time to pray.

One preeminent sign of his presence with us is the Eucharist. Here too we must decide to believe he was telling us the truth at the Last Supper when he said: "This is my body; this is my blood." May our celebration of Christmas truly be a celebration of our belief in Emmanuel, "God is with us." And may it lead us to a greater appreciation of the Eucharist we celebrate each week.

Christmas December 25, 2004

Did you ever hear of Robert Fulghum? He wrote a book called *All I Ever Really Needed to Know, I Learned in Kindergarten*. He wrote a lot of other stories too, and today I want to tell one of them. His story is about a Christmas play. There was a little Protestant church out in the country that used to have a Christmas play every year at its Christmas service. It was always somewhat chaotic, but they enjoyed doing it anyway, until several years ago when the performance was especially traumatic. The children in the Sunday school were the main actors. There had been an outbreak of the flu right around Christmas so some of the kids were not feeling well. The little boy who played Joseph got sick and upchucked in the middle of the play and so did two of the wise men. The play was usually held at night, and two of the angels were nervous and cried and wet their pants. The congregation was worried that the shepherds who carried candles might set something on fire. And to top it all off, there had been a sleet storm and a power failure right before Christmas, so because some people's clocks had stopped, several of the actors came late. That year the decision was made to have no more plays.

Well, as time went on new members joined the church and after a few years, there were new people calling for a Christmas play. Those who opposed the idea were talked into it and before long they were involved in making angel

costumes and decorating the church for the Christmas play. The angel choir was whipped into shape. A real manger with real straw was obtained and someone borrowed two small goats for the occasion. But to make it really authentic, someone suggested getting a real donkey for Mary to ride on. They had never used a donkey before and it seemed like a great idea. They decided to hold the play on Christmas morning, so none of the little kids would get scared and cry or wet their pants and so they wouldn't have to worry about any of the shepherds setting the church on fire with their candles. Lots of people came, of course, since it was Christmas. The play started off pretty well. The angels sang almost on-key and in unison. The goats did get away from the shepherds and put on a show in the parking lot, but they got them under control. The Star was shining brightly over the manger when Joseph came into the sanctuary leading the donkey with Mary riding on it. The donkey made two steps into the sanctuary, took a look at all the people and got stage fright. He just stood like a statue right where he was. Now if you were out on the farm, you might do a few things to get the donkey moving again, but in church some of those things might seem inappropriate. Mary gave the donkey a few kicks with her heel, but the animal wouldn't move. One parishioner came out of the audience to grab the halter and pull the donkey and the president of the church board, in his Sunday best, got behind the donkey and started pushing. The floor of the sanctuary was polished cement so the two of them slowly slid the rigid animal across the floor. With progress being made the choir director turned on a tape recording of some Christmas hymns. Just as the donkey with his puller and pusher reached the middle of the church, the tape recorder blew a fuse and there was a sudden silence. And in that silence, from the backside of the donkey came a noise that needed no explanation. The donkey then brayed loudly and the crowd broke into hysterical laughter. The church decided once again, no more Christmas plays. But... someday somebody will come along and say "let's do another Christmas play." Hope is always alive, hope that *this* time, *this* year we'll get it right.

Isn't the story of the Christmas play a lot like Christmas itself? We make a big production, get worn out, frenzied, frustrated, excited, happy, hopeful, laugh and cry. We'll sing, maybe almost on key, some may get sick, some may get scared or nervous and wet their pants, some may have their feeling hurt, some may need to be pushed into getting the Christmas spirit.

Christmas is real life. Only it's a lot more of it than usual, and all at once. But we'll do it again and again.

But it's not just for the fun of it all that we do it. Primarily we'll do it again and again because of one person whose birthday we celebrate. Every child's birth gives hope to his or her parents, but the child whose birth we celebrate today gives hope to all the world. He gives us hope that, in spite of all our faults and imperfections, someday we might get it right, some day we might all love one another, someday there might be peace in our world and peace in our hearts. As Isaiah tells us in the first reading: "Every boot that trampled in battle, every cloak rolled in blood, will be burned as fuel for flames." But even if we don't get it right in our lifetime, all is not lost. The child whose birth we celebrate has assured us that God created us for more than just a few short years on this earth, and that God wants us to enjoy peace, love and happiness forever and he has shown us the way to find it. That child is our God who created us and who loves us infinitely and who has shown that love in every way possible. We celebrate that love not just on Christmas but every time we gather in his memory as we do tonight. Life is messy. Life may be like Robert Fulgham's Christmas play, where some things go right and some do not, where all the actors and actresses are not perfect, but what is good about life is we have each other and at the center of it all we have the greatest love and hope there is, Jesus, our Lord. May you all have a blessed and peaceful Christmas filled with God's Spirit of love and joy. Amen.