Lectio Divina – Third Sunday of Advent Year A

Contexts

Matthew’s Gospel (in brief)

* Composed between 80-90 CE
* Author is anonymous, but named as ‘Matthew the tax collector’ by later tradition.
* Written in scholarly ‘synagogue’ Greek.
* Incorporates almost the entire Gospel of Mark, plus material from Q and material unique to Matthew.
* Structured around 5 major discourses (each ends with the phrase: “When Jesus had finished….”:
  + Prologue – chapters 1- 4 Genealogy, Nativity & infancy
  + 1st: 5-7 Sermon on the Mount
  + 2nd: 10 Missionary Discourse
  + 3rd: 13 Parable Discourse
  + 4th: 18 Community Discourse
  + 5th: 23-25 Apocalyptic Judgement Discourses
* May be a parallel for the 5 books of the Pentateuch - Jesus the new Moses.
* Jesus first words are ‘to fulfil all righteousness’.
* A handbook for Church leaders to assist them in teaching and preaching, worship, mission and polemic.
* 2 broad categories: discourse & narrative.
* The only Gospel to explicitly mention the ‘Church’ – Matthew is theologian of the church.
* Initially addressed to a Jewish-Christian audience – only late in the Gospel is there openness to Gentiles.
* Names Jesus as ‘Messiah’ at the very beginning and throughout the Gospel.

Matthew 11:2-11 – things to notice

* This Sunday’s Gospel follows Matthew’s Mission Discourse which has dealt with the Mission & commissioning of the Twelve, how they are to face future persecution, appropriate & inappropriate fear, confession/proclaiming Jesus to the people and the rewards of discipleship.
* This Gospel is at the beginning of a section called ‘Rejection by this generation’. The section begins with John the Baptist’s question about Jesus.
* Even in prison John hears about Jesus. He sends messengers to ask Jesus who he really is.
* Matthew names Jesus as Messiah (Christ) – ‘John in prison heard what **Christ** was doing…’ Matthew creates a direct link between naming Jesus as Christ and the words of the messiah in the following sentences (‘the blind see’, etc)
* “Are you the one to come….?” – a reference to the long-expected messiah. Knowing about the works of Jesus, why does John ask the question? Perhaps it is because Jesus actions reveal that he is not the sort of messiah John is expecting. Was John part of the movement of the day which looked forward to a ‘warrior-messiah’?
* Jesus does not answer the question directly, but points to his works (‘the blind see’, etc) a reference back to a number of sayings in the Book of Isaiah, considered descriptions of the messiah. This is how Matthew emphasis the kind of messiah that Jesus is – not the ‘warrior-messiah’ but a messiah who bears God’s mercy through liberation of body and spirit – God’s blessing on the needy. Note the reference back to the first reading.
* ‘happy is the one who does not lose faith in me’ – a further underlining of the idea of keeping faith with Jesus as the Messiah.
* The second section turns the question about Jesus’ identity into a question about John’s identity.
* John’s messengers leave, and Jesus begins to give witness to John.
* There are 6 rhetorical questions beginning with, ‘What did you go out into the wilderness to see?’ followed by three positive assertions about John: he is a prophet and more, he is the messenger of God, he is to greatest human being (‘of all the children born of women…’). John is identified with Elijah (‘he is the one of whom scripture says: Look I am sending my messenger before you….’)
* In this passage both John and Jesus are the fulfilment of the Scriptures.
* ‘yet even the least in the kingdom…’ not easy to interpret, but there is an idea that this section may have sprung from a debate between the disciples of John (who may well have thought that John was the messiah) and the disciples of Jesus; or perhaps there were some disciples of John not yet fully integrated into the early Christian communities.

The Liturgical Context – why does the church choose this passage to reflect on this Sunday?

The Advent journey through the readings in a word: Advent 1 – Awake!

Advent 2 – Prepare!

**Advent 3 – Rejoice!**

Advent 4 – Receive!

This Sunday marks the turning point in the Advent Season. Traditionally called “Gaudete Sunday” it is a day of rejoicing that the Saviour is near. The focus shifts from the final coming of Christ at the end of time to the first coming of Christ at Bethlehem. The note of joy is symbolised by the inclusion of the colour rose among the purple of the Season.

The joyful first reading from the prophet Isaiah proclaims that God is on his way to save his people. This coming brings healing and rejoicing and an end to sorrow and lament.

Using images of farmers and prophets, the letter of St James urges patience in our waiting for God. A kind of *patient certainty* is the attitude of the disciple.

Perhaps it is actually us who are slow in responding to God; slow in letting the message of the Gospel and the Holy Spirit transform our lives so that we too might have power to bring healing and joy.

In the Gospel Jesus fulfils the prophecy of the first reading about the Messiah. John the Baptist asks, “Are you the one who is to come, or have we got to wait for someone else?”

The words of Jesus clarify his identity and that of John the Baptist. Jesus comes, not as the kind of warrior-messiah, slaughtering and slashing, but as ‘the kindness of God’, tending the sheep, healing and liberating the needy - the blind see again, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, and the dead are raised to life and the Good News is proclaimed to the poor.

But is Jesus the ‘one’ for us, or are we really waiting for someone or something else to save us?

Our Christmas can’t simply be about Jesus’ birth a long time ago, celebrating an historical anniversary. It has to be more than that - the celebration of a fresh discovery of an ever-deepening presence of Christ in each of us.

Rejoice! God is not only ‘on his way’, he is already here!