

A Reflection for the Third Sunday of Advent

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God. Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.' Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. Isaiah 35.1-10

The Prophet Isaiah foresees a world in which what is broken and distorted has been restored and made new; what is tired and weary is reawakened and refreshed; what is dirty is made clean, and what is overcome by grief and despair is lifted up again into joy and gladness.

What he sees is the answer to a prayer which we usually use at Pentecost:

Send forth your Spirit, O Lord, and renew the face of the Earth
(cf Psalm 104.30)

There were similar echoes between Advent and Pentecost in the readings last week.



On the Second Sunday of Advent, the reading from Isaiah's prophecy spoke of a world in which the pristine order of Paradise, as God had originally made it, is restored: there is no violence or bloodshed, no fear nor death; all the creatures abide in harmony with each other, while a lively child – think of Jesus in the Nativity Scene, surrounded by the other creatures and not only by human company – is free to dance over the nests of vipers, because there is no risk or danger or threat. Everything is at peace; everything is in harmony; everything is good:

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. Isaiah 11.6-9

This reflects a vision in which we return to our pristine condition, as God intended and planned – before the distortions of human mischief, egotism and coercive will were unleashed. Again, Isaiah uses language which we adopt again at Pentecost:

A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. Isaiah 11.1-3

These are the sevenfold gifts of the Holy Spirit: of wisdom and insight, of prudence and fortitude; of genuine knowledge; and of reverence and wonder before the Face of God. Between them, these qualities describe a spiritual and moral stance in which the *image and likeness of God* shines through us *without any compromise* (cf Genesis 1.26-7).

Notice how Advent prepares us for the definitive observance of Pentecost, how our scrutiny of these prophetic words from the deep past opens up a sense of genuine possibility for the future, pointing us to the moral and spiritual means to make us ready to prepare the way of the Lord (cf Isaiah 40.3). May we be authentic bearers of this vision in our own day and age.

The image shows Claire Tabouret's proposals for six new stained glass windows in Notre Dame in Paris, depicting Pentecost

