

Strengthen weak hands and feeble knees

Third Sunday of Advent – Cycle A – December 15, 2019

Isa 35:1-6,10; Jam 5:7-10; Mt 11:2-11

“Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees” (Isa 35:3)

Three Scriptural Signposts:

The 3rd Sunday of Advent is ‘*Gaudete Sunday*’ loosely translated as ‘Joyful Sunday’—signaling the halfway mark of the Advent season—echoed in the ‘Entrance Antiphon’: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say, rejoice! Indeed, the Lord is near” (Phil 4:4-5). The liturgical colour is rose.

1. Isaiah’s prophesy in the first reading is reminiscent of the Exodus, which took place some thirteen centuries before the Christ event. Though sounding like the entry into a promised land, it rather describes the end of and exit from Babylonian Exile and the rebuilding of broken lives six centuries before Christ’s birth. Through their infidelity, indolence and idolatry, the Israelites had lost their communitarian identity and their freedom and bore the trials and torments of the Exile. Nonetheless, by using King Cyrus—who had captured Babylon and set the Jews free—God was giving them a new lease of life. This liberation from Babylonian slavery would be such a great source of joy that “the wilderness [which separates Babylon from Jerusalem] and the dry land shall be glad.” The prophet’s words resound with hope and joy. The exhortation: “Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees; say to those who are of a fearful heart, ‘Be strong, do not fear!’” breathe hope amidst hopelessness and instill courage in the fearful. This is prophetic assurance that God’s Hand will be upon the people. With the coming of the Messiah, the power of God’s Hand will be tangible and visible when “the eyes of the blind shall be opened, the ears of the deaf unsealed, the lame will leap and the dumb sing for joy” (vv.5-6). There is also mention that “the ransomed of the Lord shall return ...”. Though this was partially fulfilled in 538 BC with the ‘return’ from Exile, this will more fully be understood with the advent of the Messiah. Indeed, all these ‘signs’ point to Messianic power and presence.
2. The Gospel narrative opens with the imprisoned John the Baptist asking his disciples to make inquiries about Jesus. The query is strange: “Are you the one who is to come, or do we wait for someone else?” Did John suddenly develop doubts about Jesus’ identity? There could be a couple of explanations for this. First, the reports that the imprisoned John got from his disciples that Jesus was a gentle, merciful and loving person, might not have fitted with his previous prediction of a judgmental, punishing, “throwing into the fire” kind of messiah (see Mt 3:7-12). So, probably confused about this misfit between his perception of Jesus and the ‘*real*’ Jesus, he must have wanted to clarify for himself whether Jesus was, indeed, the promised one. Second, it is also possible that Matthew the Evangelist wants to evoke in Jesus’ disciples (i.e., us, today), an answer to John’s question, “Do *we* believe that Jesus is the Messiah, or do *we* seek another?” The ball is in our court, so to say.
3. To John’s apparent questioning, Jesus reiterates Isaiah’s Messianic prophesy of the first reading about restoring sight to the blind, making the lame walk and raising the dead to life. Jesus’ answer also reiterates other prophesies of the Messiah (see Isa 61:1-2), which

Jesus himself proclaims in his visit to the synagogue at Nazareth (Lk 4:16-19). The miracles Jesus mentions are not meant to be ‘proofs’ of his Messianic mission but ‘signs’ that call for discernment, decision and discipleship. Those who wish to be his disciples must know that he is ‘different’ from all their preconceived ideas of ‘*who*’ the Messiah should be. He will be merciful, not judgmental and vengeful. Jesus then praises his cousin, John, for his life of mortification, insistence upon truth, and thirst for justice. However, in the same breath Jesus says that a new era has dawned in Him. Great as he was, John the Baptist was the last prophet of the First Testament and the herald of He who was to come: Jesus! Now, in and through Jesus, God’s Reign was inaugurated and, even the “least in the kingdom of heaven” would, in a way, be greater than John.

Linking the Second Reading to the Theme: One must not mistakenly think that Advent is a time of preparation only for the Incarnation and birth of Our Lord. It is not. Advent also points out to Jesus’ ‘second coming’ as the Letter of St. James indicates. James gives us the example of a farmer who must wait patiently for the rains. But, not without soiling his hands with hard work! While the Lord’s ‘coming’ is pure gift and unmerited grace, there’s need for human toil, preparation and great patience. Indeed, God’s Hand works in tandem with the farmer’s hands to produce a hundredfold harvest.

Today’s responsorial psalm is the first of the set of five ‘*Halleluyah* Psalms’ (Pss 146-150) that conclude the Book of Psalms. God is praised because God is trustworthy. God’s Hand is once again seen in ‘signs’ like executing justice for the oppressed, feeding the hungry, setting prisoners free, and protecting sojourners, widows, orphans. The refrain pleads, “Come, Lord, and save us!”

An Appropriate Anecdote: Little Miriam and her daddy were crossing a narrow bridge over a river. Fearing for his child, Miriam’s daddy said to her, “Sweetheart, please hold my hand so that you don’t fall into the river.” Miriam said, “No, daddy! *You* hold my hand.” Puzzled, her father asked: “What’s the difference?” “There’s a big difference,” replied Miriam. “If *I* hold your hand and something happens to me, I may let go of your hand. But if *you* hold my hand, I’m sure that no matter what happens, you’ll never let go of my hand.” Like Miriam, the Israelites rested safe and secure in God’s Hands. God’s Hand—and their helping hands—signified hope.

In Lighter Vein: In olden days when pulpits were used for homilies, a newly ordained priest was preaching his first sermons in an old church during Advent. Nervous and trembling—with ‘weak hands and feeble knees’, so to say—he muttered: “Behold! I come” Sadly, his mind went blank Undaunted, shaking the railing of the pulpit, he said more forcefully, “Behold! I come” No use. His mind remained blank. A third time, banging on the railing, he cried out: “Behold! I come” Unfortunately, the railing gave way and he found himself in the lap of an old lady and apologized profusely. She said, “It’s alright, Father! You warned me thrice about coming ...”

Reflection: The theme of hope threads together all three readings. But, though the fulfillment of hope ultimately rests in God’s Hand, we must prepare for Christ’s coming by doing two things: (a) trusting in God and heeding Jesus’ words, “happy is the one who does not lose faith in me” (Mt 11:6); (b) being a ‘hand of God’ in strengthening the weak hands and feeble knees of others, today.
