

# Preaching the Lectionary



# Preaching the Lectionary

The Word of God  
for the Church Today

Third Edition

*Reginald H. Fuller*  
*and*  
*Daniel Westberg*



LITURGICAL PRESS  
Collegeville, Minnesota

[www.litpress.org](http://www.litpress.org)

Cover design by David Manahan, O.S.B.  
Photo by Marck Pawluczuk, iStockphotos.com.

Unless otherwise stated, the Scripture quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, Catholic edition, © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used with permission. All rights reserved.

This third edition of *Preaching the Lectionary* comprises articles originally published in *Worship* magazine (February 1971 through February 1974; October 1974; May 1981; January 1982). The material has been substantially reedited and rearranged, and commentary on Scripture readings not previously covered has been incorporated.

© 2006 by Order of Saint Benedict, Collegeville, Minnesota. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form, by print, microfilm, microfiche, mechanical recording, photocopying, translation, or by any other means, known or yet unknown, for any purpose except brief quotations in reviews, without the previous written permission of Liturgical Press, Saint John's Abbey, P.O. Box 7500, Collegeville, Minnesota 56321-7500. Printed in the United States of America.

1            2            3            4            5            6            7            8

---

### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Fuller, Reginald Horace.

Preaching the Lectionary : the Word of God for the Church today /  
Reginald H. Fuller and Daniel Westberg. — 3rd ed.

p.      cm.

Includes index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-8146-2792-1

ISBN-10: 0-8146-2792-7

1. Bible—Liturgical lessons, English. 2. Bible—Homiletical use.

I. Fuller, Reginald Horace. Preaching the new Lectionary. II. Westberg,  
Daniel. III. Title.

BS391.3.F85 2006

252'.6—dc22

2006019109

# Contents

Preface to the Third Edition vii

Preparing the Homily ix

## PROPER OF THE SEASONS

### Year A

Advent Season 1

Christmas Season 15

Lenten Season 38

Easter Triduum 63

Easter Season 78

Solemnities of the Lord during the Season of the Year

Trinity Sunday 109

Corpus Christi 112

Season of the Year 117

The Old Testament Semicontinuous Alternative Readings 214

### Year B

Advent Season 217

Christmas Season 231

Lenten Season 241

Easter Triduum 262

Easter Season 263

Solemnities of the Lord during the Season of the Year

Trinity Sunday 286

Corpus Christi 289

Season of the Year 293

The Old Testament Semicontinuous Alternative Readings 381

**Year C**

Advent Season 383

Christmas Season 393

Lenten Season 400

Easter Triduum 414

Easter Season 416

Solemnities of the Lord during the Season of the Year

Trinity Sunday 433

Corpus Christi 434

Season of the Year 438

The Old Testament Semicontinuous Alternative Readings 525

SELECTED SOLEMNITIES AND FEASTS

January 25, Conversion of St. Paul, Apostle 527

February 2, Presentation of the Lord 529

March 25, Annunciation 532

June 24, Birth of St. John the Baptist

Vigil 534

Mass during the Day 536

June 29, SS. Peter and Paul, Apostles

Vigil 540

Mass during the Day 542

August 6, Transfiguration 544

August 15, Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary 545

September 14, Triumph of the Cross 548

November 1, All Saints 551

December 8, Immaculate Conception 554

PASTORAL SERVICES

Lectionary for Weddings 557

Lectionary for Funerals 573

Index to Biblical Passages 597

## Preface to the Third Edition

It is over twenty years since the second edition of *Preaching the Lectionary* was published, and it has continued to be in use to this day.

Many changes have taken place in the meantime. New methods of exegesis have gained currency in biblical scholarship, and a number of new versions of the Bible in English have appeared. The Common Lectionary is now available in a revised form, and promises to become widely adopted. And, of course, the church is confronted with new situations and challenges unimagined only a generation ago, changes to which the Word of God must be addressed today.

If *Preaching the Lectionary* is to continue in use for homilists and preachers as it has been in the past, a new edition is a real necessity, which is our aim in providing this work. These are the most important among the changes made in this revision: (1) the various denominational modifications of the Roman Lectionary, particularly the Episcopal and Lutheran, have been replaced by the *Revised Common Lectionary* (for those days when the readings from the *Lectionary for Mass* and the *Revised Common Lectionary* are the same, no distinction is made in the heading; where the readings differ, the reference from the *Lectionary for Mass* is listed first and is followed by the *Revised Common Lectionary* with the designation RCL); (2) quotations from the Bible, unless otherwise stated, are from the *New Revised Standard Version*; (3) homiletical applications of the biblical message have been updated with a view toward more current relevance.

We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Nashotah House students Tom Papazoglakis and Shawn Doubet, and Aaron Raverty of the Liturgical Press in the preparation of this revision. It is our hope that as the earlier editions did in their time, this work may continue to serve those in a broad spectrum of the Christian Church who have the sacred task of preaching God's Word.

REGINALD H. FULLER

DANIEL A. WESTBERG

*Advent 2005*



# Preparing the Homily<sup>1</sup>

## Introductory Considerations

Since the Second Vatican Council, it has become increasingly accepted that the ministry of the word is an essential part of the liturgy. It is my understanding—and my observation of current practice bears this out—that in the Catholic communion a homily is expected at every celebration of the liturgy. The same is undoubtedly true, and probably always has been, among Lutherans, though for them this would normally mean only on Sundays. I must confess to a sense of shame when I attend Holy Communion in my own Anglican tradition and observe that Anglican priests of all complexions, evangelical as well as High Church, are frequently content to celebrate the Eucharist without preaching. They ought to have a strong sense of guilt at their dereliction of duty.

This requirement, or at least this desirability, that there should be proclamation of the word, undoubtedly makes many demands upon the preacher, and very little help has been given in the procedure to be followed in the preparation of a homily. It was to fill this gap that, as an emergency measure, I undertook to write the commentaries that appeared in *Worship* over a space of three years and have since been reissued in book form (now the third edition). In what follows I shall try to analyze the procedures that I followed. Here I must confess that I did not start out with any clear-cut methods or prior understanding. True, I had certain ideas about the function of liturgical preaching, for I had written on the subject some fifteen years previously.<sup>2</sup> I had a general idea, gathered from my German Lutheran contacts, that there were basically three stages of sermon preparation, the third being the actual composition of the sermon.

First, it should begin with exegesis. Exegesis, as I understand it, poses the question: What did the text *mean* in its original situation?

<sup>1</sup> Originally written for the Second Edition.

<sup>2</sup> *What Is Liturgical Preaching? Studies in Ministry and Worship* (London: SCM Press, 1957).

The disciples of Bultmann, following Karl Barth, insist that exegesis itself already poses the question: What does the text mean today? and that until one has heard it speak to the contemporary situation, one has not heard the text. But I agree with such different scholars as Bishops Krister Stendahl<sup>3</sup> and Stephen Neill<sup>4</sup> in assigning this concern to a later stage—the stage of exposition. Users of the *Interpreter's Bible* will remember the two divisions exegesis and exposition. I follow the arrangements of this commentary and distinguish between exegesis, which asks: What did the text mean? and exposition, which asks: What does it mean today?

The homilist who understands his or her own task in these terms will be concerned with two poles: the word of God as it is attested in Scripture, and the concrete situation in which the congregation finds itself today. The homilist's task is to take what Scripture said and make it say the same thing, but in such a way that it can address the congregation today.

The first part of the homilist's task is, in theory, always the same. What Scripture *said* remains said in that situation for all time. What Scripture *says* is in principle variable, because the new situation always slants, though it does not determine, what was once said. Here we stumble upon Bultmann's hermeneutical principle of the *Fragstellung*, the question we bring to the text. Our questions to some extent condition what Scripture says to us. Of course, we should try to be as objective as possible in exegesis, recognizing that complete objectivity is never wholly possible. But at any rate we should not make a virtue of our lack of objectivity, as the Bultmannians seem to do.

The second part of the homilist's task is that for which he or she is uniquely and properly equipped—an intimate knowledge of the congregation, of their concerns, their joys, sorrows, temptations, and sins. Parish calls, counseling sessions, and the hearing of confessions should equip the preacher for this. It is not here but in the preliminary work of exegesis that the pastor and homilist is likely to find real difficulty. Exegesis demands certain academically acquired skills, and the homilist may well fight shy of this. The commentaries in this book were designed to help particularly at this point. They were motivated by the convic-

<sup>3</sup> K. Stendahl, s. v. "Exegesis" in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*.

<sup>4</sup> S. C. Neill, *The Interpretation of the New Testament* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964) 87.

tion that I had developed in Germany when I studied at Tübingen in 1938–39, that a true proclamation of the Word of God depends upon a correct exegesis of the text. I will now try to lay bare some of the presuppositions of my method and the procedures that in large part developed as I went along month by month producing the commentaries.

### Exegesis—Some General Considerations

To do exegesis, every method of biblical criticism must be brought into play where appropriate, for the first task of exegesis is to reconstruct the situation for which the text was originally written. Especially important here is the question of the audience or addressee(s). As Willi Marxsen has observed, this is really more important than the question—so beloved of students who have just made their acquaintance with biblical criticism—of authorship.<sup>5</sup> Yet authorship is also important, precisely in this connection. It makes a difference to the situation envisaged whether one thinks, for example, that the letter to the Colossians was written by Paul or by an unknown Paulinist in the subapostolic age.

Here it is important not to be afraid of critical positions. It is useful, for instance, to divide the Pauline letters into the homologoumena (those letters about whose Pauline authorship there is no reasonable doubt) and the antilegomena (those about whose Pauline authorship there are varying degrees of doubt). The antilegomena, if post-Pauline, are to be understood as witnesses to early Catholicism—that is to the institutional consolidation of Christianity after the deaths of the original witnesses and the nonarrival of the parousia.

We need not, of course, dismiss early Catholicism as an aberration or degeneration, like Käsemann, who discovered or rediscovered its importance. We may regard it, as I do personally, as a natural, inevitable, and justifiable development. But we cannot ignore it in our exegesis; otherwise we will make the antilegomena more Pauline than they actually are. Texts that witness to the institutionalization of the church in this way should not be harmonized with the genuine Paul or explained away but should be allowed first to speak in their own right. But neither should their difference from the authentic Paul be so exaggerated that the texts concerned are dismissed as valueless for preaching. It has been said, for instance, that in Tübingen today the view is

<sup>5</sup> W. Marxsen, *Introduction to the New Testament*, trans. G. Buswell (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968) 10.

held that one cannot preach from a text in Acts because Acts is early Catholic and un-Pauline, and therefore is not gospel!

Turning to the Gospels, the modern view, a view that has become widely accepted since the 1950s, is that these documents consist of three strata. On the top level we have the theology of the evangelist, commonly known as the evangelist's redaction. Below this lies the tradition, the Jesus material as it was constantly put to use in the oral period between A.D. 30 and 65/70. At the bottom is the stratum of the authentic Jesus material—authentic sayings and parables spoken by him, authentic memories of his career from his baptism to his crucifixion. As has frequently been observed, Catholics especially should feel no discomfort at this modern understanding of the Gospels as largely the product of the church, for their high doctrine of the church should help them to accept this view.

The arrangement of a three-year cycle of readings from Matthew, Mark–John, and Luke successively has made the topmost level of the Gospel tradition—the respective evangelist's redaction—particularly important to the homilist. I once heard a parish priest complain that the same incident came up more than once in three years in the different evangelists. He suggested, therefore, that the Lectionary needed revision. But the fact of the duplication of a pericope directs the homilist to what is distinctive in that particular evangelist.

Above all, the homilist must avoid the temptation of hasty harmonizing. A conspicuous instance of this occurred when the Markan form of the temptation narrative was read for the first time on the first Sunday of Lent. I heard a homilist start by saying that Mark had obviously abbreviated the story, and proceed to preach about the three temptations as recorded in Q (Matthew and Luke), which he treated on a purely historical level! He thus missed the challenge of facing up to the temptation as presented by the Markan redaction. *Why*, if he knew the Q tradition, did Mark omit the three temptations? Where did his real interest lie? Those are the questions the homilist should have asked.

A study of the Lectionary shows that most of these duplications occur on the major feasts and holy days of the year. Not only the temptation story but particularly the passion account is taken each year from a different Gospel on Passion (Palm) Sunday. The homilist should concentrate upon what is distinctive in the particular evangelist's presentation.

It is clearly important to acquaint oneself with the methods and principles of redaction criticism. The redaction is discernible in such

factors as the arrangement and order of individual pericopes in any given Gospel, in touches that the evangelist has clearly added with his own hand. Where we possess the evangelist's source, this is relatively easy, for we need only compare the evangelist with that source. Thus, if we accept the two-document hypothesis (the priority of Mark and the common source of Matthew and Luke, commonly called Q), we can see where Matthew and Luke have altered Mark and where Matthew and Luke diverge in their presentation of the Q material. In the latter case, of course, it is more difficult to decide which of the two reproduces the original and which has made the alteration, but a knowledge of the stylistic peculiarities and theological interests of the two evangelists helps us to answer this question.

Where we do not possess the source of the evangelist's material, namely, in the case of Mark and in the case of the special material of Matthew and Luke, source criticism is of no use. Here only form and tradition criticism can help. Thus we can distinguish between the pure form of a pericope and the disturbance of this form by later comment or application. Even here we cannot be sure whether the accretion is due to the evangelist himself or had already taken place earlier in the tradition. But as we become more familiar with the style and concerns of any given evangelist, we learn to discern the sort of thing that evangelist is likely to have added himself. The third type of material that allows us to pinpoint the evangelist's redaction is that composed as fresh material. A good example of this is the Markan summaries, such as Mark 6:53-56.

This distinction between the three different levels of the tradition can be very helpful for the preacher, for it offers three possibilities of treating a particular pericope. A good instance of this is the parable of the sower. At the Jesus level, this consists of the pure parable itself (Mark 4:3-8). At a later stage in the tradition, the Hellenistic missionary church added the allegorical interpretation (Mark 4:14-20). Finally, the evangelist Mark added from another tradition the passage on the interpretation of parables (Mark 4:10-13). The homilist will have to decide which of these three levels speaks most directly to the situation of the congregation and treat the parable at that level. It would be a mistake to reject the later levels of the tradition as valueless because they do not go back to the historical Jesus. The later levels represent successive expositions of the Jesus tradition in a new situation. Tradition is a living and growing thing. In fact, the homiletical use of a text is itself part of the history of its tradition.

Many of the Sunday pericopes consist of miracle stories. Here again there are, at least in principle, three levels of tradition. First, there is the miracle as it actually occurred in our Lord's ministry. Authentic sayings of Jesus show that for him exorcisms and healings were signs of the inbreaking of the eschatological reign or kingdom of God.<sup>6</sup> Next comes the shaping of these miracle stories in the post-Easter community. Usually this is in the interests of a particular christology. Thus they may present Jesus as the eschatological prophet<sup>7</sup> or the divine man.<sup>8</sup>

A good example of this is the feeding of the multitude that occurs several times in the Gospels and is read more than once in the three-year cycle. Personally, I do not doubt that Jesus celebrated an eschatological meal with his disciples in a tense atmosphere of crisis at the turning point of his ministry. But later, in the post-Easter community, this authentic memory was taken up and shaped by two different interests. The eschatological meal became a model for the church's eucharistic meal, while the interest in Jesus as an eschatological prophet led to the development of an emphasis on the miraculous multiplication of the loaves, a greater feat than that of Elisha (2 Kgs 4:42-44).

Finally, there is the evangelist's redaction of the miracle tradition. Mark clearly wished to reduce the emphasis on the miraculous. The reason for this was that the Christians in his church were being tempted by false teachers (Mark 13:6, 22) to think of Jesus as a divine man who displayed his divine powers solely through his miracles. Mark did not altogether reject the picture of Jesus as a miracle worker, for he accepted and preserved a relatively large number of such stories. But he toned them down by the device known as the "messianic secret." Demons that confessed Jesus as the Son of God (apparently a title that the false teachers used in association with their christology) were silenced. People

<sup>6</sup> Matt 12:26 (Q) par.; Matt 11:4b-6 (Q) par. On the question of the historicity of Jesus' miracles, see R. H. Fuller, *Interpreting the Miracles* (London: SCM Press, 1963) 18-45. More recently J. P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> See F. Hahn, *The Titles of Jesus in Christology* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1969) 352-388; R. H. Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1965) 167-173; R. E. Brown, "Jesus and Elisha," *Perspective* 12 (1971) 85-104.

<sup>8</sup> H. D. Betz, "Jesus as Divine Man," *Jesus and the Historian*, ed. F. J. Trotter (E. C. Colwell Festschrift; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968) 114-133; J. M. Robinson and H. Koester, *Trajectories Through Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971) 216-219.

who were healed were likewise silenced. And above all, the disciples were silenced after the Transfiguration—until after the Resurrection!

Mark's point seems to be that Jesus can only be rightly confessed as Son of God in the light of his crucifixion and resurrection. We must recognize that we are dealing here, not with history as such, but with Mark's interpretation of history. The "divine man" christology was allowed into the canon of Scripture only after it had received this Markan correction. This would seem to forbid the homilist from exploiting the miracles of Jesus for their own sake. They can be safely treated only as prefigurations (to use Austin Farrer's word) of the supreme messianic miracle, which is the death and resurrection of Jesus. Thus, redaction criticism helps the homilist to use the miracle stories as a real proclamation of the gospel.

We see something similar happening in the great Johannine signs that occur in the Lenten series of readings. Here the "divine man" tradition is corrected, but in a different way. The miracle stories are frequently used as a launching point for typically Johannine dialogues and discourses. The best examples are the miracles of the feeding of the multitude, the blind man of Siloam, and the raising of Lazarus in chapters 6, 9, and 11 respectively. The feeding of the multitude is explained in the ensuing discourse as a sign that Jesus is the bread that came down from heaven and gives life to the world. The healing of the blind man is a sign that he is the light of the world, and the raising of Lazarus a sign that he is the resurrection and the life. Here again the homilist would not want to treat the miracle stories as they are found in the pre-Johannine tradition—simply as signs that Jesus is a great wonderworker, perhaps the greatest of wonderworkers. Rather, to preach the gospel, the homilist will use the miracle stories as signs of what the Johannine discourse reveals Jesus to be.

The passion narratives, which are read in Holy Week, benefit the homilist if critically treated. Quite early on, the form critics saw that these narratives differ from the rest of the gospel material in that they are more or less continuous, not a string of pericopes. Basic to them is genuine historical reminiscence of the end of Jesus—his arrest; the preliminary investigation before the Sanhedrin; the trial proper before Pilate, which established that Jesus could without too much difficulty be disposed of as a messianic pretender; and finally his actual crucifixion and death. These bare facts, however, do not themselves contain the gospel. The gospel comes from the way these bare facts were interpreted by the post-Easter church. We know from 1 Cor 15

that from the very early days the death of Jesus received a threefold interpretation.

First, Jesus' death took place *in fulfillment of the Scriptures*. The Cross was a scandal not only for the Jews but even for the believers themselves. They had to come to terms with it in their own minds, and the only way they could do so was to discover predictions of the Passion in the Scriptures—what we now call the Old Testament. This led them first to those psalms that speak about the righteous sufferer and his vindication, notably Psalm 118:22, which speaks of the rejected stone that became the chief cornerstone. Then there were the great passion psalms—Psalms 22 and 69. Details from these psalms have undoubtedly colored the passion narratives, and it is always a moot point whether the facts led to the prophecies or the prophecies suggested the facts. Probably it was a bit of both. The basic facts of the Passion (like Judas' betrayal of Jesus, Simon's denial, and the disciples' forsaking Jesus) were so scandalous that they drove the early Christians to the Scriptures, whereas peripheral details, like the casting of lots for Jesus' garments, could well have been added to fulfill the prophecy of Psalm 22.

Second, the early community asserted that Jesus died *for our sins*. This atonement theology probably entered at a slightly later stage, perhaps after the community had hit upon Isa 53, and possibly in connection with its Passover celebration. Anyhow, it is clear that this motif has had little effect on the passion narrative itself, only upon the institution at the Lord's Supper, which was probably a separate pericope on its own (see 1 Cor 11:23-25).

The third motif was that Jesus died *as Messiah*. This is strongly attested by the title on the cross, whose historicity is beyond all doubt, though in the intention of those who perpetrated it the title meant a political pretender. But this motif has colored the Markan form of the trial scene before the Sanhedrin (note its absence in John's Gospel), while the king motif is particularly stressed in the trial before Pilate.

Then comes each evangelist's own treatment of the Passion. Mark was probably the first to combine the passion narrative with pericopes about the words and deeds of the earthly Jesus. This, too, was part of his attempt to tone down the "divine man" motif. Mark emphasizes the *theologia crucis* in his own distinctive way, which is different from that of Paul. Jesus is forsaken by all, finally even by God, for he dies with the words "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" on his lips. This must not be harmonized with the words from the cross in the other Gospels.

Matthew basically followed Mark but played down Jesus' isolation, stressing the paradox of his royalty in the midst of humiliation and the motif of Scripture fulfillment. Luke probably had an independent passion narrative that he touched up with additions from Mark. It has been said that Luke transposed the passion story from the key of tragedy to the key of pathos. John, lastly, emphasizes the majesty of Jesus in his suffering. Jesus remains master of the situation throughout. The Passion is the manifestation of his glory. He dies with the triumphant cry *tetelestai*, which the New Revised Standard Version (in the KJV tradition) weakly renders: "It is finished." The Vulgate was better: *Consummatum est*.

In the Easter season the preacher has to handle, among other things, the resurrection narratives. We have to remember that the New Testament nowhere narrates the resurrection as such. The event in which God raised Jesus from the dead is shrouded in the mystery proper to an eschatological event, occurring at the precise point where observable history comes to an end. The two this-worldly events that *are* narrated are the discovery of the empty tomb and the appearances of the risen Lord to his disciples. Here the basic facts belong to the earliest tradition (1 Cor 15:3-8), but the *stories* of the empty tomb and the appearances are the product of later development. Surprisingly, it was the pericope of the empty tomb that first took shape (Mark 16:1-8). It was used as the vehicle for the Easter proclamation. This is uttered by an angel—*angelus interpretans*, a frequent scriptural device: "He is not here, he is risen."

As 1 Cor 15:3-8 indicates, the appearances were first listed, not narrated. The appearance stories apparently had not yet taken shape by the time Mark's Gospel was written, unless we are to suppose that episodes like the walking on the water and the transfiguration are postresurrection stories retrojected into the earthly ministry. The appearance stories as found in the later Gospels are used as vehicles for the church's post-Easter theology, which springs from its faith in the Resurrection.

The Easter event is the foundation of the church as the eschatological community and the inauguration of the church's mission. The *kyrgma* and the two sacraments of baptism and eucharist are grounded importantly upon the Easter event, but even they have some roots in the historical Jesus. The apostolate is similarly grounded. The emphasis on the material reality of the Lord's risen body in Luke 24 and John 20, which is at variance with the more "spiritual" presentation of the earlier appearance story (Matt 28; John 21), guards against the interpretation of the encounters as purely subjective experiences rather than as revelatory disclosures of eschatological reality.

## The Church Year

The context in which the homilist operates is that of the church year. This provides a kind of hermeneutical framework in which the liturgical use of Scripture is set. It is therefore important for the homilist to understand something of the rationale of the church year.

The church year is centered upon the reality of salvation history, focused in the Christ event. In the earliest church there were two main celebrations: the Lord's Day, or Sunday, and the period of the *Pentecostē*. The first weekly observance of the Lord's Day was not so much a historical commemoration of the resurrection as the fulfillment of the Sabbath, the proleptic participation in the rest that remains for the people of God (see Heb 4:9; *Epistle of Barnabas* 15.8). The second celebration was the *Pentecostē*, the period of fifty days that began with the (Christianized) Passover and concluded with the day of Pentecost.

It could be argued that we ought to have returned to this simple calendar, with its exclusively eschatological emphasis. But for pedagogic and other reasons, it was deemed advisable to retain the articulated church year as it developed in the main after the age of Constantine. All the same, it is important that we learn to understand the articulated church year in the light of the simpler eschatological scheme—an understanding as important for the preacher as for all participants in the liturgy. The articulated church year breaks down the total complex of the Christ event into its constitutive parts, yet it does so not merely for historical commemoration but to expound a particular aspect of the total eschatological event. Each separate "mystery," to use the language current in Catholic theology, must always be seen as part of the total mystery of the Christ event.

The church year starts with the first Sunday of Advent, whose theme is the culmination of the future eschatology taken over from the end of the previous year. Thus, one year dovetails into another. It is this prominence of future eschatology that has led in part to the dropping of the old pericope for the day, namely, the entry into Jerusalem, which however is still retained as an option by the Lutherans. Today's theme is not the first coming of Christ in humility but his coming again in glory. It is only on the second Sunday of Advent that the thought of the first coming begins to take over in preparation for the celebration of Christ's birth.

On the second and third Sundays of Advent the figure of John the Baptist moves to the center of the stage. This is significant. At first sight John the Baptist would seem to postdate the coming of Christ, if by that

coming we have in mind his birth at Bethlehem. But the appearance of the Baptist at this point calls our attention to the fact that when we speak of the first coming of Christ, we are referring not merely to Bethlehem but to his first coming in its totality, which includes the whole ministry capped by death. It is for this total coming that John serves as the forerunner.

On the fourth Sunday of Advent the Blessed Virgin Mary takes over the stage, thus serving as the immediate preparation for the birth of Christ.

Although Christ's first coming in humility is the primary focus during the second, third, and fourth weeks of Advent, the theme of the Second Coming is not dropped altogether. The two comings must always be considered together. The first is an anticipation of the second, and the second is the completion and fulfillment of the first. Thus, the theme of the Second Coming is carried through to Christmas itself, especially in the propers for the Midnight Mass. The word *epiphania* is used in the Christmas readings from Titus to signify *both* comings.

When they come to deal with the Incarnation itself, the propers of the Christmas Masses are clear about the place of the nativity story in the mystery of Christ. The birth is emphatically only *Vorgeschichte*, a prelude to the Christ event proper, which really begins with the baptism of Jesus and continues through his crucifixion and subsequent vindication. In this prelude God is inserting into human history the One through whom the act of redemption will be wrought. This is the biblical way of looking at the birth stories. They are not concerned with the combination of humanity and divinity in a single person, as though humanity and divinity were abstract qualities. Thus, the affirmation of the Johannine prologue that the Word became flesh is not merely an interpretation of Christmas but declares the inauguration of a history in which the Word will be dynamically enfleshed in the career of Jesus from Jordan to Calvary. For the flesh of Jesus, in Hoskyns' words, is his whole observable history, not abstract humanity.

Although the arrangements of the revised Roman calendar at Epiphany did not go as far in the right direction as they might have, the tendency of the reform is clearly to play down the story of the Magi and to upgrade the baptism of Jesus, which was the original emphasis of this festival and which, though obscured in the West, has always remained preeminent in the East. It is in the baptism that the process of the revelation of God in the human history of Jesus properly begins; the baptism is therefore, rightly understood, the first of the epiphanies. The

visit of the Magi, like the rest of the infancy stories, is only a prefiguration of the revelatory event proper.

Even though the Roman calendar has introduced the rather colorless designation of Sundays "in Ordinary Time" for the period between Epiphany and Lent, the *propers* themselves, notably the gospels and the accompanying Old Testament readings, maintain the Epiphany themes. In the stories of the early ministry, Jesus is manifested as the Messiah in word and deed. In RCL's optional variant, these epiphanies are fittingly climaxed on the last Sunday before Ash Wednesday in the reading of the Transfiguration story, which the Roman Lectionary, following its ancient but purely adventitious tradition, designates for the second Sunday of Lent.

In recent times Lent has come to be thought of almost exclusively as a season of personal penitence (the Lutheran tradition has been an exception; as a glance at the Lutheran hymnals will show, even the earlier part of Lent is devoted to the Passion). It is not surprising that voices continue to be raised in favor of a shorter Lent. Of course, there is a place for personal penitence, but to keep it up for forty days and forty nights tends to pall.

Wisely, the revised calendar makes a shift in emphasis that people have not yet understood. Ash Wednesday becomes the great day of penitence in the church, a sort of Christian Yom Kippur. The readings of the Sundays in Lent now focus upon the baptismal mystery, a theme that is now reinforced by the rites of the catechumenate. Together, catechumens and faithful prepare to participate, or to renew their participation, in the baptismal mystery at the paschal feast. Thus, the emphasis of the readings is the new life to which the baptized are called and its ethical demands. Of course, this still involves the note of penitence, but it is penitence placed in a proper evangelical perspective rather than a pious work. The second readings are drawn largely from the Pauline exhortations, or *parenesis*, which are based upon Hellenistic catechetical formulas, while the gospels in Year A (which form the best series and are recommended for invariable use when the rites of the catechumenate are celebrated) comprise the great Johannine signs, long viewed as symbols of the Christian experience of baptism.

Holy Week speaks for itself. On Passion Sunday the theme of the triumphal entry (except in the option permitted in RCL) is clearly relegated to the subordinate position it has always really had. The homily should normally be based upon the Passion, and if it deals with the

entry into Jerusalem at all, it should treat it only as the curtain-raiser to the Passion.

The ancient unitary paschal feast has been split up into a group of three celebrations—Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil. Each of these three days has its own distinctive color, expressed by the different ways in which the Eucharist is celebrated on it. Holy Thursday is a brief outburst of joy. When the service concludes with the stripping of the altar and the darkening of the church, the brevity of this outburst is dramatically emphasized. The Good Friday Communion—whether it be from the reserved Sacrament, as in the Roman and Episcopal provisions, or whether the Eucharist itself is celebrated, as in the Lutheran tradition and in an increasing number of Anglican churches—is celebrated in the bare church in an atmosphere of extreme austerity. At the Easter Vigil, the great point about the Eucharist is that it marks a transition from darkness to light, from sorrow to joy, from bondage to freedom, from death to life.

It is a pity that in modern parish life the fifty days of Easter count for so little compared with the forty days of Lent. The rites of the catechumenate provide some hope that a more constructive use may be made of this period. It is a time when the church should be especially conscious of both the presence of the risen Lord in its midst and the presence of the newly baptized. The liturgical gospels reflect these two themes. We first read the appearance stories and later the farewell discourses of the Fourth Gospel. The newly baptized are, with the rest of the faithful, now enjoying the foretaste of eternal life in the Spirit-filled community.

Ascension Day emphasizes one aspect of the Easter season. This season is the celebration not only of the victory of Christ over death but preeminently of his exaltation as Lord, or *Kyrios*, of the church and the world. Ascension Day does not inaugurate a new period but is merely an incident within the fifty days of Easter. Finally, although Pentecost celebrates the gift of the Spirit, it too merely highlights a theme that is present to some extent throughout the great fifty days. Note, for instance, the use of John 20:19-23 as the gospel on Pentecost. This has caused some perplexity. Why read on Pentecost what happened on Easter Sunday? Such objections indicate a naive historical way of thinking. The gift of the Spirit is the outcome of the total Easter event. Probably the risen Lord conveyed his Spirit in every one of his appearances, and it was not confined to a single day in the way the Lukan schematization suggests.

If Pentecost marks a single event at all, that event is the inauguration of the kerygma. And in the church year it also marks the conclusion

of the Easter season. The season after Pentecost or Ordinary Time begins at once, and the Pentecost observance is, very rightly, no longer extended into an octave, which unduly prolonged the fifty days and obscured their unique significance.

The season after Pentecost is bounded at each end by a solemnity—the feast of the Holy Trinity at one end and the feast of Christ the King at the other.<sup>9</sup> In the post-Pentecost season the systematic reading of Scripture, begun in the post-Epiphany season, is resumed. After the excitement of Christmas–Epiphany and Lent–Holy Week–Easter, it is sound to relax somewhat. Now Scripture is read in course, and the reading of it is less colored by the season of the year. Here is the chance for broad themes of theology and ethics to be broached. It is important, however, to note that at the tail end of the season after Pentecost, or Ordinary Time, a futurist eschatological note comes in.<sup>10</sup> So we end where we began—with the theology of Christian hope.

### **From Exegesis to Preaching**

In the first part of this introduction we offered some general considerations about exegesis, laying considerable stress on the value for the preacher or homilist of the critical approach to the Bible. We will now briefly summarize the main steps in exegesis and then consider how one might move from exegesis to sermon composition.

Ideally, exegesis should start with a translation of the passage from the Greek (or Hebrew, in the case of the Old Testament). Not many, however, will be able to attempt this, so we must be realistic and suggest that where this is not possible, the best alternative would be to compare

<sup>9</sup> The Lutheran provisions call particular attention to the two boundaries of the post-Pentecost season by prescribing white as the liturgical color for each occasion. They do the same thing for the two Sundays which, in their reckoning (as in the Episcopal provisions), bound the Epiphany season, that is, the Baptism of the Lord and the Transfiguration.

<sup>10</sup> The last Sundays in Ordinary Time should always feature the theme of future eschatology, regardless of how many Sundays there are after Pentecost in any given year. By putting the flexible readings at the beginning of Ordinary Time, the newer prayer books (e.g., the 1979 American BCP) achieve this. Note that the 2000 C of E *Common Worship* makes this explicit with the titles Fourth Sunday before Advent, Third Sunday before Advent, and so on.

at least two different modern translations.<sup>11</sup> Any marked variations will call attention to a disputed point of exegesis and send the homilist to commentaries for closer investigation. In the light of findings there, the homilist must weigh the pros and cons and decide which interpretations to accept.

Second, the homilist should then look in the margins of the various versions to see if there are any disputed readings (text criticism). These too can be checked in commentaries, so that a decision can be reached as to which text to accept.

Third, the homilist should turn to points of literary criticism. What is the literary genre of this passage (e.g., miracle story, parable, sayings collection)? Having ascertained this, the homilist should look for signs of redaction that are visible, for example through the disturbance of the original genre by additional material or through changes made in a known source. What light is thrown on the evangelist's understanding of the passage by the place in which he locates it? In other words, the homilist must study the context of the passage. Introductory questions are also relevant here (date, authorship, addressees), for they determine the situation to which the text was addressed.

Fourth, the homilist should look for any significant theological words in the passage and make a study of those words with the help of a concordance or theological dictionary. The context of other passages should be considered; words should not be looked at simply in isolation.<sup>12</sup>

Fifth and last, in the light of the information gathered, the homilist should write out a paraphrase of the passage, stating in his or her own words what the biblical writer was saying to those addressed.

The next stage forms a bridge between the exegesis and the sermon. It is what the Germans call the *Predigtmeditation*, or sermon meditation. The preacher has to be concerned with two poles—the original message of the pericope, as distilled from the exegesis, and the current

<sup>11</sup> The older English Revised Version and the American Standard Version (updated in 1971 as the NASV) enjoy the advantage of being the most literal translations and therefore particularly helpful to those who know little or no Greek or Hebrew. The RSV and NRSV follow the same mode of faithfulness to the text, but occasionally substitute a completely different idiom for the original and make it more difficult for the student or homilist to appreciate the force of the Hebrew or Greek text.

<sup>12</sup> See J. Barr's provocative critique of the Kittel *Wörterbuch* method in his *Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961).

situation of the audience or congregation when gathered for the liturgy. Here the homilist, as we have seen, will have to draw upon personal knowledge of their concerns as disclosed through parish visits, counseling, and the confessional, or through the media or current literature. Then it must be decided how the text speaks in judgment and mercy, in wrath and grace, to this situation. The homilist must ask: What is the law and what is the gospel contained in the text? Finally, the homilist should envisage the result sought for from the hearers: repentance, renewed faith, some act of devotion, or some concrete act of obedience.

These are the considerations that I had in view and developed as I wrote my commentaries on the readings, and it is my hope that these observations may be of help to the homilist as he or she continues the responsible task of declaring the Word of God to the people of God.

*Year A*

## ADVENT SEASON

There is some uncertainty as to what the dominant theme of Advent should be. Is it focused upon the traditional “last things”—the end of the world, the general resurrection, the Last Judgment, and the new heaven and new earth? Or is it a period of preparation for the feast of the Incarnation? Does it place us back in the period of salvation history prior to the coming of the Messiah?

The three-year Lectionary has tidied up this confusion by developing the future—eschatological themes on the last Sundays per annum of the old year, and by bringing these themes to a climax on the first Sunday of Advent. Then, from the second Sunday of Advent on, it introduces other themes in preparation for the Incarnation. Thus, the successive church years dovetail into one another.

### FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

**Reading I: Isaiah 2:1-5**

This is a vision of the pilgrimage of all the nations to Zion to be taught the ways of Yahweh. Yahweh will arbitrate international disputes, and a universal peace will follow. The prophecy is reproduced almost verbatim in Mic 4. It is uncertain whether Micah lifted it from Isaiah or Isaiah from Micah, or whether both derived it from a common source. Scholars seem to favor the third possibility. It certainly looks like an ancient liturgical fragment.

It is important to notice two things about this vision. It is speaking about what will happen at the end of history—in other words, it is eschatological. It is not envisaged as a possibility within history. Holy Scripture does not permit us to indulge in the illusion that a time will come within history when there will be no more wars. This does not,

of course, mean that we should not work to eliminate the causes of war or to avert or bring to an end particular wars. It only means that we should not cherish extravagant hopes that are doomed to inevitable disappointment. The final abolition of war will be possible only when God's purpose has triumphed in the consummation of history.

The second point to notice about the vision is that it is only when the nations have been taught God's ways and walk in God's paths that they will beat their swords into plowshares and live at peace with one another. "It is a beautiful vision; but, be it noted, peace rests in no human program, but in obedience to the divine law" (J. Bright in *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*).

### **Reading II: Romans 13:11-14**

This is the traditional reading for the first Sunday of Advent. It is full of great New Testament eschatological words: *night/day, darkness/light, sleep/wake, hour* and *full time*. This language presupposes the early Christian scheme of the two ages—this present evil age and the new age soon to dawn. It interprets Christian existence as a life of tension. It is lived within this present old age but is already determined by the new age that is soon to come. Christians stand in the dark with their faces lit by the coming dawn. They can therefore already cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. They can live "as in the day," although actually they are still in the night.

Note that it is not by their own unaided effort that the believers are to conduct themselves becomingly as in the day, but rather by "putting on the Lord Jesus." In Gal 3:27 the same phrase is associated with baptism: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have *clothed yourselves with Christ*." Hence, in our present passage Paul is exhorting Christians to live out the implications of their baptism, in the power that their baptismal status gives.

One final problem. Paul tells his readers that our "salvation" is nearer than when we first believed, that is, nearer than it was when we first became Christians. By "salvation" Paul is not thinking of salvation in an individualistic, pietistic sense, as though we were now nearer to our death and therefore to heaven. He means the great day of salvation, the consummation at the end of history. Like all the early Christians, the Apostle believed that this end was to come very shortly—so soon, in fact, that it was now appreciably nearer than when the Romans first became Christians. Paul was clearly mistaken as to the date, for we are still here today and the consummation has not come yet. Perhaps an

answer can be sought along these lines: the Christian always has to live as though the final consummation were just around the corner, in the certainty of it, a certainty so strong that already the light of the new age is casting its ray upon the Christian's present existence.

**Gospel: Matthew 24:37-44 RCL: Matthew 24:36-44**

This passage is from Matthew's version of the so-called Synoptic apocalypse (Matt 24; Mark 13; Luke 21). Like other contemporary Jewish apocalypses, the Synoptic apocalypse relates a series of catastrophes identifiable with historical events that preceded the Jewish revolt of 66–70 C.E. These events are to usher in the final consummation—the return of the Son of Man, the Last Judgment, and the new heaven and the new earth.

Such an apocalyptic scheme creates an overall impression that conflicts with the general tenor of Jesus' teaching elsewhere, including this present passage, which Matthew has inserted from his sayings source into the Synoptic apocalypse. Here, in sayings that have the freshness of authentic Jesus material, the end is depicted, not as something that is preceded by a carefully planned apocalyptic timetable, but as something that is to come suddenly, like the flood in Noah's day: "they knew nothing until the flood came . . . . Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming . . . . for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

This coming of the Son of Man will be accompanied by the ultimate separation of the saved and the lost. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and the other left. One will be saved, the other rejected. Therefore, watch as a householder must watch for the thief. There can be no doubt that sayings like this, rather than the Synoptic apocalypse as a whole, correctly reproduce the eschatological message of Jesus.

But this brings us face to face with the same problem as in the Pauline passage, though here it is Jesus rather than the early church that was apparently mistaken about the date of the end. It did not come soon. Once again, we can take the apocalyptic perspective as an expression of the eternal consequences of the choice with which Jesus confronts his hearers. They must certainly react as though the end were just around the corner. Joachim Jeremias has made a further bold and exciting suggestion: Jesus does not regard the will of God as fixed and immutable. God can shorten the days for the sake of the elect (Mark 13:20), and he can also lengthen the period of grace (Luke 13:6-9) as a free act of mercy.

Verse 44, added by RCL, is probably an isolated saying attached to the Little Apocalypse by Mark and not an original part of it. Some critics follow P. W. Schmiedel, who included it among his “pillar passages,” i.e., sayings whose authenticity is assured because no one would have attributed ignorance to Jesus. For other critics the Father/Son christology suggests a post-Easter creation. Still others think that in pre-Mark tradition “Son” was “Son of Man.” This would be an apocalyptic triad (Father, Son of Man, angels). It could then be an authentic saying of Jesus, asserting not his own ignorance, but merely stating that God alone knows the date of the end, not even the other members of the conventional apocalyptic triad. That is my own personal view. Today this saying serves as a warning against fundamentalists who are absolutely certain of the date of the End, and who adopt bizarre modes of behavior accordingly. Rather, as already argued, the point of apocalyptic language is to drive home the eternal consequences of the choices we make in history.

### **The Homily**

If the homilist chooses to preach on the Old Testament reading with its vision of universal peace, he or she will have to be careful to avoid the suggestion that this is a humanly realizable ideal. Rather, it is a picture of the kind of world God will establish when history comes to an end. This does not mean, however, that the vision is irrelevant to human political endeavor. All human activity is open to the “pull of the future,” and it is the human task to erect “advance signs” of the final realization (J. Moltmann).

The second reading suggests several possibilities. The homilist may characterize Christian existence as an “advent situation”—the Christian lives in the present age but is decisively conditioned by the age to come. Then, too, the homilist might exhort the congregation to live out the implications of their baptism, through which they were translated into the advent situation, or wrestle with the problem of the nonfulfillment of the imminent-end expectation of the earliest church and how that expectation can become an existential reality for the contemporary believer.

The gospel appears to present the homilist with two different possibilities: either to exhort the hearers to eschatological alertness (Watch, for at any moment you may have to make an eternal choice) or to wrestle with Jesus’ as well as the early church’s expectation of the end and try to make sense of it for present Christian existence. The eternal import of the choice Jesus presses upon us means, to say the least, that we must live alertly, “as though” the end were coming at any moment. Or,

taking up the suggestion of Joachim Jeremias, the homilist can lead the hearers to see how it is through the grace and mercy of God that the end did not come when Jesus said it would, but that God has given us more time to prepare for the great day.

## SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

### **Reading I: Isaiah 11:1-10**

As we indicated above, the second Sunday of Advent marks the shift from future eschatology to preparation for the Incarnation. This shift appears in all the readings of this Sunday, though, as we shall see, the second readings of the second and third Sundays of Advent contain echoes of the earlier theme.

In today's Old Testament reading we have one of the great messianic prophecies of Isaiah. It pictures the ideal king from the family of David. He is to be endowed with the spirit of Yahweh and with charismatic gifts. Note the three pairs: "wisdom and understanding" are powers of intellect; "counsel and might" denote practical ability; "knowledge and the fear of the Lord" are gifts of piety. The benefits of the king's reign are described in idyllic terms.

This picture is much older than the messianic hope proper. It probably expresses what each succeeding generation hoped for from its Davidic king. Yet the ideal was never realized, and the poem was shelved for messianic fulfillment. Christian faith naturally found its fulfillment in the coming of Jesus, and that is the sense in which we read it in the liturgy today.

### **Reading II: Romans 15:4-9 RCL: Romans 15:4-13**

This is the traditional epistle for this Sunday, and because Cranmer constructed a new collect on the basis of this reading, Anglicans have long called this Sunday "Bible Sunday." Unfortunately, this had the effect of distracting attention from the main Advent theme of this passage.

Two things are to be noted. First, the "scriptures" and "whatever was written in former days" refer to what we now call the Old Testament. There was as yet no New Testament in the early church, of course; in fact, when Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, he was actually taking a hand in producing what would later become the New Testament.

On these Advent Sundays there is, as we have seen, a particular emphasis on the Old Testament as the book of promise. This theme is

taken up in our present passage, with its reference to hope. Paul prays that by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. The Old Testament is precisely the book of hope and promise. It is an incomplete book, pointing forward to an event that had not yet taken place, namely, the final act of God. Jew and Christian ought to be able to agree about this. But then comes the point of divergence. Christians believe that the event toward which the Old Testament points has, in principle at least, already occurred with the coming of Jesus Christ. Jews, of course, believe that the event has not yet taken place.

The Christian belief that the promises of the Old Testament have already been fulfilled in principle does not mean that there is no further room for hope. Paul says that the Old Testament Scriptures were written in order that *Christians* may still have hope. The theology of hope (as in Jürgen Moltmann and Johannes Metz) stresses that the acts of God are always such that they contain within them the hope for more.

This pattern reproduces itself again and again throughout salvation history. When the Christian belief that God has fulfilled his promise in the sending of his Son Jesus Christ is kindled, it at once also raises the hope of the Second Coming. So Christian existence, like that under the Old Testament, remains an existence geared to the future. That is why the Old Testament has not become irrelevant now that the event to which it points has taken place. We still read the Old Testament to orient ourselves in hope to the future, to the final event toward which the Old Testament points—the consummation of the kingdom of God.

RCL's extra verses (vv. 10-13) round off the theme of hope with three more OT citations (Deut 32:43; Psalm 117 [118]:1; Isa 11:10), all of them reinforcing the point that the ultimate redemption to which the OT points will include the Gentiles as well as Israel. The citations conclude with a petition that the recipients abound in this hope.

**Gospel: Matthew 3:1-12**

If the readings of this season are preparatory to the Incarnation, it seems a little odd that John the Baptist should figure so prominently on these Sundays. Unlike the Old Testament prophets or the annunciation story that we shall read on the last Sunday of Advent, the Baptist does not point toward the nativity of Jesus, but rather to his ministry, life, and death: "one who is more powerful than I is coming after me . . . He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire"; and (in John's account), "Here is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."

When New Testament scholars speak about the Incarnation, however, they tend to think of it in somewhat wider terms than popular piety or even dogmatic theology does. The Incarnation, from the biblical perspective, is the whole “Christ event,” the total coming of the Son of God in the flesh, which includes not only his nativity but also his whole ministry, his death, resurrection, and ascension. In fact, most of the New Testament, aside from the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke, can proclaim the Christ event without speaking of the nativity at all. So when the Advent season prepares for the “advent” of Christ, this is not just his nativity but rather his total coming. The nativity is merely one way of speaking of the advent of Christ, and not the central one at that. Hence, it is wholly appropriate that John the Baptist should figure prominently in the Advent season as a herald of the Messiah’s coming.

### The Homily

Hope is one of the great themes of Advent. Today’s reading from the letter to the Romans highlights the place of hope in the Christian life, while the Old Testament reading from Isaiah fills that hope with concrete content and places it in a historical and social context. In preparing to address this theme, the homilist would do well to read something from the works of Moltmann, Metz, or Pannenberg.

Alternatively, the preacher might choose to focus upon the figure of John the Baptist (and perhaps devote two Sunday homilies to him—this one and the next). John the Baptist was essentially one who pointed away from himself to the One who was to come. In the same way, every preacher and *every* sermon points away from the preacher and away from the sermon to the Coming One, and nowhere is this more necessary than in the Advent season, during which we prepare to celebrate the coming of the Messiah into our world and to accept him as he seeks to come into our lives.

## THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

### Reading I: Isaiah 35:1-6a, 10 RCL: Isaiah 35:1-10

Although this chapter comes from the earlier part of Isaiah (Isa 1–39), its theme and mood are far more reminiscent of the unknown prophet of the Exile whom we call Second (Deutero-) Isaiah. Like Second Isaiah, the writer of this chapter speaks of the return from Babylonian exile in terms of the exodus: in the return to Jerusalem the miracles of the first

exodus will be repeated (see Isa 40), the wilderness will rejoice and blossom as it did in the exodus, and the ransomed of the Lord will return and come to Zion. There will also be accompanying miracles: the eyes of the blind will be opened, the ears of the deaf will be unstopped, the lame will walk, and the tongues of the speechless will sing.

This passage is very important for the New Testament. Jesus' healing miracles, for instance, are recounted in language derived from this passage. Thus, the story of the deaf-mute in Mark 7 actually uses the unusual word *mogilalos* (with "an impediment in his speech") which the Septuagint (Greek Old Testament) uses in this passage. Again, in the answer to John in prison (see today's gospel), there are further echoes of this passage.

The New Testament took up such prophecies as Isa 35 and found their fulfillment in the Christ event. It is in the coming of Christ that the wilderness blossoms as the crocus; it is in him that the glory of the Lord is revealed (cf. Isa 35:2 and 40:5 with John 1:14); it is in Christ that God comes to save his people; and it is in Christ that the exiles return to Zion with great joy.

There is nothing unusual in this shift of application. It is a procedure that took place constantly throughout the Old Testament and Judaism, and it is simply continued in the New Testament. Each successive event in salvation history discloses a new meaning in previous prophecies. In this way the word of the Lord, once uttered, continues to be an effective force in salvation history.

RCL's additional verses (vv. 6b-9) depict in greater detail the road on the return from exile. It will lead through a land like Paradise.

### **Reading II: James 5:7-10**

Among the readings appointed for this Sunday, this is the only one that does not take up the theme of the healing miracles that accompany the advent of the Messiah. And when it speaks of the "coming" of the Lord, it means, not his first advent, but the Last Judgment: "the Judge is standing at the doors!" This is not an oversight on the part of those who drew up the Lectionary. Here we have a lingering echo of the futurist eschatology that was dominant on the last Sundays of the old church year and continued through the first Sunday of Advent. Even when we concentrate on the first coming, we must not lose sight of the second. Even as we rejoice with exuberant joy at the first coming, we must also listen to the warning of the impending judgment and to the challenge to be patient. The use of the farmer as an example of patience seems

to be suggested by our Lord's parable of the seed growing secretly in Mark 4:26-29, where it was applied to the coming of the kingdom.

A second illustration of patience, and of suffering as well, is taken from the Old Testament prophets. This, too, is especially apt for the Advent season. The Old Testament prophets believed that the word they uttered would be fulfilled very shortly, but they had to learn that God fulfills this word in God's own good time, even the word that God had promised through the prophet to fulfill very soon. Does God therefore deceive the prophets? Not if Jesus is right in maintaining that God can rescind God's holy will as a free act of mercy (see gospel, first Sunday of Advent). When that happens, the lesson of patience is especially pertinent.

**Gospel: Matthew 11:2-11**

The casual reader of the Gospels is often puzzled by this story. How is it that John came to wonder whether Jesus was the Coming One? After all, had not John already greeted Jesus as the Coming One (Matt 3:14)? Was he perhaps having second thoughts now? Had Jesus turned out to be a different kind of Messiah from the one John had expected—one meek and lowly of heart rather than one who purged the threshing floor with the winnowing fan of judgment?

These are interesting questions, but they are irrelevant to a proper understanding of our text. The real question is the one addressed to us: Can *we* believe that he is the Coming One or must *we* look for another?

In answer to John's question—which is our question, too—Jesus does not give a straight yes or no but points to what is happening in his ministry: the blind see, the lame walk, etc. Note the oblique way in which Jesus speaks of his mighty works. He does not say that *he* is healing the blind. The blind are given their sight by God! Thus Jesus indirectly affirms that his miracles are works of God wrought through him. But he never says so directly. The hearer has to work this out for himself or herself and to make a decision of faith.

Traditional apologetics used to cite the miracles of Jesus as "proofs" of his "divinity." This is not the way the Bible uses them. They are not proofs but signs—signs for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear. And they are not signs of Jesus' divinity (a Greek rather than a biblical term) but signs that God is present and at work in Jesus. Note that Jesus' answer echoes the language of Isa 35 and other prophecies (Isa 29 and 61). So the reader is confronted with a decision: Either these works are signs of the eschatological presence of God in Jesus or they are ultimately trivial episodes with no claim to our faith. But: "Blessed is anyone who

takes no offense [i.e., does not stumble] at me," that is to say, the person who sees that God is eschatologically active in Jesus' word and work is already a partaker in the blessings of the messianic age.

The second part of the gospel reading deals with the place of John the Baptist in salvation history. He is the messenger who prepares the way of the Messiah; he is the expected Elijah returned to herald the end. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he, for John stands at the threshold of the new age. He is the last of the prophets and, like them, still points forward to the kingdom of heaven and the coming of the Messiah. He still stands on the Old Testament side of the great divide between the two ages. He is the "sentinel at the frontier between the aeons" (Bornkamm).

### **The Homily**

Unless the homilist decided last Sunday to preach on John the Baptist both last Sunday and this Sunday, the more obvious choice is to expound the Old Testament reading and gospel as a promise and fulfillment of the first advent—of the Messiah, with emphasis either on the accompanying signs or on the work of John the Baptist (the latter is the primary theme of the Sunday).

If the second reading is chosen as the basis for the homily, the Second Coming of the Messiah and the consequent need for patience would be highlighted. Here it is important to see that the letter of James does not stand alone but is part of the New Testament canon. Its one-sidedness (all the New Testament writings are in some way one-sided) needs to be balanced by the witness of the other books in the New Testament canon. So today the one-sided concentration of the passage from James on the Second Coming needs to be balanced by the emphasis on the first coming in the other readings. The Christ who is to come again is the same Christ who has already come in the Incarnation. His work will then be the consummated work initiated at his first coming. Only in this way can we give an authentically Christian exposition of James.

If this is to be the second of two homilies on John the Baptist, we note that this week an element of uncertainty creeps into the Baptist's mind: Is Jesus really the Coming One? That is a question that is put to us today. Compared with human hope, is what the gospel has brought to the world really the fulfillment of our hopes? There is no *proof* that Jesus of Nazareth is indeed the Coming One. All we have to go on is his activity—the blind see, the lame walk, etc., but above all, the poor have the Good News preached to them. For there, in the preaching of

the gospel, is the real miracle. But that calls for a decision: Either Jesus is the Coming One or he is not. So, "Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

## FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

The rhythm of Advent differs from that of Lent. Lent descends from Ash Wednesday through the penitential season to the abyss of Passion Week and Good Friday—and then Easter bursts suddenly upon us. Advent, on the other hand, rises in a steady crescendo toward the full light of Christmas. This rhythm is aptly symbolized by the German custom of the Advent wreath, now popular in many countries. The crescendo of Advent is reflected in the liturgical readings, which, beginning with the prophecies of Isaiah and John the Baptist, find their culmination on the fourth Sunday of Advent in a series of readings that focus on the Blessed Virgin and the annunciation of Jesus' birth.

### Reading I: Isaiah 7:10-14 RCL: Isaiah 7:10-16

This text may be interpreted at two quite different levels; though, as we shall see, there is a real connection and continuity between the two.

First, there is the meaning of the text in its original historical situation. This situation is described in 2 Kgs 16:5-9. Syria has entered into an alliance with the northern kingdom of Israel against the southern kingdom of Judah, of which Ahaz is king. Together they have laid siege to Jerusalem. Isaiah offers Ahaz a sign that everything will eventually turn out successfully, but Ahaz piously refuses such a sign, doubtless because he wants to have no truck with Isaiah's advice. But Isaiah goes on and gives the sign anyway: "the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel." It is probable that the young woman in question is the wife of the king and the son to be born, Hezekiah. The sign, then, will concern the continuation of the Davidic dynasty, a sign that God is with God's people. This is the first level of meaning.

At the second level, the text is taken up by the evangelist Matthew and applied to the birth of Jesus. The Lukan infancy narrative also echoes it (see Luke 1:31), thus indicating that this application represents a tradition earlier than the two evangelists. In the Septuagint translation used by the evangelists, "young woman" is rendered *parthenos* ("virgin"). In a sense, the resultant application of Isa 7:14 is far removed from what the prophet originally intended—he was thinking

only of the immediate political situation and of the certainty that God would shortly intervene on the side of Judah. But in linking this assurance with the continuance of the Davidic line, Isaiah had expressed a hope that continued in Israel and that, for the Christian Church, found its final fulfillment in the birth of Christ from the Virgin Mary. He is the true Emmanuel, God-with-us.

RCL adds verses 13-14, which in figurative language make the further point that before the child is weaned and achieves moral maturity the promised deliverance will have already occurred.

### **Reading II: Romans 1:1-7**

This is the opening greeting of Paul to the Romans. Nearly all his letters were written to churches he himself had founded, but Romans was an exception. It was written to a church founded by others, to prepare the way for a future visit by Paul (Rom 15:22-24). Part of its purpose was to acquaint the Christians in Rome with the Pauline version of the gospel.

Paul begins by sketching the gospel in a traditional form, in which we find a whole series of expressions not otherwise used in his letters:

descended from David  
according to the flesh  
declared to be (enthroned) Son of God with power  
according to the spirit of holiness.

Paul can safely assume that the Romans had heard of this or similar creedal statements and that they will see at once that he preaches the same faith they have received from others before him. Later on, Paul will give another formulation of the gospel: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith" (1:16). This is not a different gospel but the same gospel stated in Paul's own language.

Jesus himself had not called particular attention to his Davidic descent, though this was probably a family tradition. That would have suggested to his contemporaries a political conception of messiahship from which he was at pains to dissociate himself. But the post-Easter community found it necessary in preaching to Israel to stress Jesus' Davidic descent as a vital qualification for messiahship. Thus, it passed into the general stock of christological concepts. Here it is used to stress the earthly side of Jesus' history ("descended from David according to the flesh") as contrasted with his exalted status after the resurrection

("declared to be Son of God . . . by resurrection from the dead"). Thus, the Davidic descent of Jesus stresses, not his exalted majesty, but his terrestrial lowliness.

**Gospel: Matthew 1:18-24 RCL: Matthew 1:18-25**

In the New Testament, the supernatural conception of Jesus figures only in the two annunciation stories in Matthew and Luke. Apart from these two stories (with the possible exception of an editorial adjustment at the end of the Matthean genealogy, Matt 1:16, though the text here is uncertain), Jesus is represented as the son of Mary and Joseph, which is who he legally was.

It is remarkable that both Matthew and Luke, whose infancy stories are in most aspects poles apart from one another, agree that Jesus was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, his mother remaining a virgin. Clearly the tradition is much earlier than either Matthew or Luke. But as to its ultimate origin, the historian can only conjecture.

The real question is what the evangelists intended to convey in this story. These stories are an affirmation of faith in the transcendental origin of Jesus' history. He is not a product of human evolution, the highest achievement of humanity, but the intervention of the transcendent God in human history from outside. "The incarnation is like a dagger thrust into the weft of human history" (Hoskyns). To affirm the virginal conception is not merely to affirm a theological miracle (though that, no doubt, is presupposed by the evangelists), but to affirm the faith that the evangelists were affirming in narrating the annunciations.

Verse 25 (RCL) makes two further points: (1) Joseph refrained from sexual relations with Mary during her pregnancy; (2) Joseph named the child "Jesus" in accordance with the angel's instruction. On point (1) Matthew says nothing about Joseph's subsequent relations with Mary. While in English the text implies that they had relations, in both Semitic (Hebrew and Aramaic) and Greek it is left an open question. The doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity, accepted by Catholics, retained by the Reformers, but questioned by many Protestants since the Enlightenment, is neither supported nor denied by this text. Personally, I interpret the doctrine in a spiritual rather than a physical sense.

**The Homily**

Taken together, the three readings appointed for this day set forth the two perspectives on the life of Jesus. From one perspective, he is a product of human history, born of a woman, descended from David—in

short, all that the Bible means when it speaks of “flesh.” On the other hand, he is Emmanuel, God-with-us, the Son of God, conceived of the Holy Spirit—in fact, all that the Bible means when it speaks of “spirit.” These two perspectives are what was called, in terms of later dogmatics, the doctrine of the two natures—humanity and deity. The homilist has the opportunity to prepare the hearers to enter into the mystery of this doctrine, to help them find the deity in the humanity, not deity and humanity as two separate entities existing side by side.