

Sr. Margaret Dorgan's Reflection

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THE VOICE OF THE PROPHET ISAIAH IN ADVENT

Advent is a season with many shades of meaning. It's all about the coming of Christ in a threefold dimension. We celebrate 1) the historical event of Jesus' birth, 2) the glorious consummation when He appears in splendor at the end of time, and 3) His coming to each one of us in the loving meeting every passing moment holds. When we say, "Come, Lord Jesus," we are asking Him to draw near in this triple sense.

The four weeks of preparation for the feast of the Nativity have their earliest origin in fourth century Spain and also in Celtic monastic practices. Prayer and fasting were characteristics of this prelude to Christmas. It could be that Advent was originally established to offset the pagan festivals honoring the god Saturn in December. Gifts were exchanged while schools and law courts closed down, warfare ceased, and masters sat down at one table with their slaves. The dominance of today's commercial overtures and preliminary secular feasting in the pre-Christmas period might seem like a contemporary echo of the Roman celebrations.

But joyousness is an appropriate reaction as we let all the bell ringing, colorful costumes, and bright decorations raise a song of praise in our hearts for what is given us in Christ. The theme of expectation that dominates Advent takes us back to the Book of Isaiah which has been called the Gospel of the Old Testament. To walk with Isaiah through these days of anticipation is to nourish our spirit with lyrical lines that arouse our deepest feelings. We turn to the Book of Consolation, which begins at Chapter 40. "Comfort, comfort my people, says the Lord. Speak tenderly... The glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all humankind shall see it" (12, 5). The word comfort appears over and over again in the chapters that follow.

The author of these later chapters is called Deutero or Second Isaiah, a prophet unsurpassed in scripture for his extraordinary poetic power. His literary style is full of life and energy combined with dignity. Shades of meaning flow in a vocabulary replete with exquisite images and powerful down-to-earth elegance. He assuages our anxieties in these words of God that speak to Mainerers who so often look out upon waters, which are usually friendly but can become adversarial. "I have called you by name. You are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you. When you walk through fire, you shall not be burned. The flames shall not consume you.... Because you are precious in My eyes and glorious, and because I love you. (43: 1,2, 4).

All the gladness in Isaiah is based on the sure vision of what lay far ahead of his own 8th century before Christ. What he saw only in dark outline has been given to us in a dazzling fulfillment beyond even his prophetic power to envisage. God spoke through him, "Behold I am doing a new thing. Now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it?" (43:19). We ask ourselves that question amid all the noise and clatter of the days before Christmas.

"Remember this I formed you. By Me you shall never be forgotten" (44:21). God is always attentive to us. But where is our attention? So much has to be done in these busy, busy days. Do we take some few moments, not to stop what we are doing but to remember God as we carry out a task? "O that You would rend the heavens and come down," Isaiah pleads poignantly (63:19). For us the heavens have been rent and our Savior has descended to assume our very humanity. He tells us, "It is I, announcing vindication, mighty to save" (63:1).

This all-powerful God takes upon Himself the weakness of human flesh. He is born of a Jewish maiden and raised to maturity as a carpenter's son. "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of Him who brings glad tidings, announcing peace, bearing good news, announcing salvation... He grew up like a young plant and like a root out of dry ground" (52:7 & 53:2). Christ is foretold in terms that denote much more grandeur than the backwater village of Nazareth would provide.

God unrolls the book of our life in this same mysterious way. We turn a corner and find what we had not expected. "My thoughts are not your thoughts," God says to us. (55:8). But God's thoughts for us are much better than our own. "The sun shall be no more your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give light to you by night, but the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory" (60:19). It is not that we disdain earthly illumination, but the divine brightness we find in the Incarnation outshines every other brilliance. We still rejoice in the rising dawn and the phases of the moon, seeing them as celestial theophanies given by our creator to remind us of One Who is truly the Light of the World.

Every time we say, "Come, Lord Jesus," we realize He has already come to us. We ask for an even deeper realization of His Presence in our lives. We have tasted the goodness of the Lord and with Mary we sing as she did before the birth of Jesus, "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior." (Lk 1:46). We who are so rich urge others, "Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters. And whoever has no money, come buy and eat. Come, without paying and without cost" (Is 55:1). This is the advertising that should be proclaimed during these days of preparation. **"They shall feed along the ways, on all bare heights shall be their pasture. They shall not hunger or thirst. Neither scorching wind nor sun shall smite them, for He Who has compassion on them will lead them... Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth"** (49: 10,13). Come, Lord Jesus. Come!

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