

These readings are about getting to know a personalized Jesus. Isaiah tells the Faithful what to expect in the Messiah. Offering hope for the downtrodden, Isaiah may date from the exile or sooner. Dating from before the exile at the time of the monarchy,<sup>1</sup> Psalm 72 is a Royal Psalm about enthroning the king as a wise and just ruler,<sup>2</sup> Psalm 72 is one of the psalms used by later Christians to turn the Magi into Kings.<sup>3</sup>

Romans is about putting on Christ as a defense against putdowns and as a royal, divine heritage. Matthew tells the Faithful the Good News about Jesus as seen through the eyes of John the Baptist, even though John does not understand why Jesus came to be baptized.<sup>4</sup> Jesus came to be baptized in order to take on the sins of the Faithful. Tolerating one another, the Faithful can also, at least vicariously, take on the sins of one another. This is true for monastic and family life. Jesus expands the Messiahship beyond families, to include the Gentiles because Jesus is the Son of God.<sup>5</sup>

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

A prophet may have offered the original Emmanuel oracle, verses 1-9 of this reading, on the occasion of a coronation. Scholars debate whether Isaiah 11:1-9, the Emmanuel oracle, is pre-exilic. If the Emmanuel oracle is pre-exilic, then the oracle refers to the monarchy covenant with the LORD. The Spirit of the LORD is one of the commitments to the House of David.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> J. J. M. Roberts, "The Enthronement of Yhwh and David: The Abiding Theological Significance of the Kingship Language of the Psalms," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 64, No. 4 (October 2002) 677.

<sup>2</sup> Sue Gillingham, "From Liturgy to Prophecy: The Use of Psalmody in Second Temple Judaism," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 64, No. 3 (July 2002) 477.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Allan Powell, "The Magi as Kings: An Adventure in Reader-Response Criticism," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 62, No. 3 (July 2000) 462, 473,

<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Israel Standing with Israel: The Baptism of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel (Matt 3:13-17)*, the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 64, No. 3 (July 2002) 520.

<sup>5</sup> W. R. G. Loader, "Son of David, Blindness, Possession, and Duality in Matthew," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 44, No. 4 (October 1982) 583.

<sup>6</sup> Richard J. Sklba, "'Until the Spirit from on High Is Poured out on Us' (Isa 32:15): Reflections on the Role of the Spirit in the Exile," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 46, No. 1 (January 1984) 9.

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*The stump of Jesse* in verse 1 means the Faithful are in exile, torn away from Jerusalem. The prophet Isaiah expects a rebirth from the coming Messiah. Isaiah is not thinking centuries down the line as Christians, reinterpreting Isaiah, do. What Isaiah prophesied did not happen. Not all First Testament prophecies were fulfilled.<sup>7</sup> For the Faithful, this means that God is paying attention, even when he does not seem to be listening. Jesus shows the Faithful how God does listen, by taking on human identity.

Isaiah describes the people of Israel, and by extension the Faithful of today, as plants, sometimes a tree, sometimes a vine planted on the mountain of God, that can be uprooted and replanted. Not only does the metaphor apply to Israel, but also to righteousness and peace (Isa 5:1-7, 6:13, 11:1, 10, 60:21; 61:3, 11; Exod 15:17; 2 Sam 7:10; Ezek 17:22-24; Amos 9:15; Psalm 80:7-13; Jer 1:10).<sup>8</sup> Jesus, then, saw himself as a misfit, looking for a place to strike down roots, much as do many of the Faithful.

The ancient Jews took *the spirit of the LORD* in verse 2 as a permanent endowment upon the root of Jesse.<sup>9</sup> Implied is the idea that the Messianic King needs no other counsel than the Spirit of the LORD.<sup>10</sup> Christians take this same spirit as the Holy Spirit. This means that the Holy Spirit not only invigorates Jesus, but He also invigorates the Faithful in earthly endeavors. The Faithful and Jesus have *the spirit of the LORD* in common.

Knowledge of the Messiah and fear of the LORD are parts of the covenant with Israel. Verse 2 and verse 3 both mention *fear of the LORD*. Knowledge is often linked with fear of the Lord (cf. Psalm 19:10) that leads to worship and obedience (Isa 11:2; 33:6; Prov 1:7, 29; 2:5; 9:10).<sup>11</sup> Is the fear of the Lord the beginning or the

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<sup>7</sup> Randall E. Otto, "The Prophets and Their Perspective," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 63, No. 2 (April 2001), 232 and throughout.

<sup>8</sup> Bernard F. Batto, "The Covenant of Peace: A Neglected Ancient Near Eastern Motif," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 49, No. 2 (April 1987) 206.

<sup>9</sup> John R. Levison, "Prophecy in Ancient Israel: The Case of the Ecstatic Elders," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 65, No. 4 (October 2003) 519.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Jensen, O.S.B., "Yahweh's Plan in Isaiah and the Rest of the Old Testament," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 48, No. 3 (July 1986), 450.

<sup>11</sup> J. Ross Wagner, "From the Heavens to the Heart: The Dynamics of Psalm 19 as Prayer," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 61, No. 2 (April 1999) 250.

culmination of wisdom? Both? Therefore, like the Faithful, the Messiah, Jesus, also nurtured fear of the Lord.

In verse 4, the Messiah *shall judge the poor with justice*. What Isaiah had in mind was himself as *poor*. As I see it, *through the eyes of Jesus*, is relative to my own judgments about the poor. The Faithful judge the poor with justice. Such judgment is an ongoing task, especially evident in democratic elections in which the Faithful participate. Isaiah does not have in mind a reward for voluntary poverty, but rather a reversal of unfortunate conditions.<sup>12</sup>

*Poor* from the Greek can refer either to Israel (and Isaiah) as oppressed and humiliated or to the humiliated status of the poor within Israel. Mary had low status. God uses her low status to make his own point about Christmas love.<sup>13</sup> Isaiah 11:4 portrays the Son of David as the ideal king, like David, arising from the ranks of the poor; then caring about the poor as well. The Christ does not satisfy elite expectations, but does satisfy the expectations of the poor and lowly.<sup>14</sup>

In verse 4, *the rod of his mouth and the breath of his lips*, I consider fraternal correction. Such fraternal correction is something the hierarchy owes not only to the Faithful, but also to their clergy. As something fraternal, correction also moves in the opposite direction, from the Faithful back up the hierarchy. Such is the relationship between John the Baptizer and Jesus. John says, in all four Gospels, that he only baptizes with water, but that Jesus will baptize with the Spirit. In other words, Jesus will correct the repentance of sins through John's baptism with water. The repentance of sins through Jesus will be through the conviction of the Spirit of God Himself. The Faithful, in turn, offer such correction to one another.

*With a little child to guide them* in verse 6, Christians interpret as the Nativity Christ child. This prophecy brings out the little child in the Faithful. Here Isaiah suggests a childlike trust in the Almighty, a trust Jesus models for the Faithful.

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<sup>12</sup> Mark Allan Powell, "Matthew's Beatitudes: Reversals and Rewards of the Kingdom," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 58, No. 3(July 1996) 463, 470.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Bauckham, Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels (Grand Rapids, Michigan/ Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002) 69-70.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Bauckham, Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels (Grand Rapids, Michigan/ Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002) 73.

In verse 9, *my holy mountain*, refers to Jerusalem, a Christian metaphor for the souls of the Faithful. Political confounding, to the point of crucifixion, does no harm to the soul of Jesus, or to the souls of the Faithful, as it turns out. *Knowledge of the LORD* emanates from Jesus and the Faithful to fill the earth.

Verse 10, *a signal for the nations*, is a sign that Jesus has come to rule politically. Such rule in a democracy can only happen through the Faithful who participate. Jesus is also a signal for the Church, a signal not to be mocked. That is the message of Isaiah and through Isaiah to Jesus to the Faithful.

## Psalm 72

The Lectionary also uses Psalm 72 for the Epiphany.

<u>Reading</u>	<u>Page</u>	<u>verses</u>	<u>Responsorial</u>	<u>Sunday</u>
4 A	19-20	1-2, 7-8,	12-13, 17 (cf. 7)	Advent 2 = Today
20 ABC	118	1-2, 7-8, 10-11, 12-13	(cf. 7)	Epiphany

The Responsorial antiphon about justice and peace is about the rule of Jesus in the hearts of the Faithful. Peace only happens because someone is strong enough to impose it. Jesus has such Divine strength, and, through Jesus, so do the Faithful. In other words, even in exile, the Faithful can worship God and through that worship find peace for themselves and all the global community.

## Romans 15:4-9

In verse 4, Paul observes that *whatever was written previously was written for our instruction*. In other words, Christians have a right to interpret Sacred Scripture with the understanding of Jesus. Paul, here, is not concerned with sin, disagreement, and lack of order. Paul is simply excited about the ability to put on Christ and live the life of Jesus. Paul appears to let the governing of the Church to Peter all the while he takes advantage of that government to preach the Good News.

In verse 5, Paul prays that the Faithful may *with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*. Just before that, however, Paul explains in verses 4 and 5 that *endurance and encouragement* brings the Faithful together. Jesus exemplifies endurance and encouragement; endurance of political disfavor from both religious and secular authorities; encouragement through his role as the promised Messiah, someone who teaches the Faithful to control their own souls.

Romans develops a “debt theology,” whereby the Faithful owe their own good behavior to God because of the good behavior of God to them in Christ Jesus. Just as Jesus welcomed the Faithful *for the glory of God* (Rom 15:7), so are the Faithful

to welcome one another for the same glory.<sup>15</sup> The grace of God in Romans balances the need for fruitful repentance in Matthew below.

Verses 8 and 9 explain that Paul is writing to Gentile Christians,<sup>16</sup> *so that the Gentiles might glorify God and I will praise you among the Gentiles*. Paul is explaining that the rule of Jesus, the Messiah, resides in the hearts of the Faithful. That residue offers hope for peace.

### **Luke 3:4, 6**

*Make straight his paths* refers to the thought and soul patterns of the Faithful.

### **Matthew 3:1-12**

Matthew 1:1—4:16 portrays Jesus as both the Messiah and the Son of God.<sup>17</sup> The Advent season is about Jesus as Messiah and Son of God through grace entering the souls of the Faithful. Advent is not an unadulterated Christmas season, however.

John the Baptist calls for repentance in verse 1, something not found in the section in Romans that Christ saves everyone. Repentance, a turning away from sin, is what John the Baptist offers. When John says *the kingdom of God is at hand*, he means at hand in the hearts of the repentant Faithful.

Matthew writes that John *had a leather belt around his waist* at the same time the Lectionary in Isaiah 11:5 proclaims that for the Messiah *justice shall be the band around his waist, and faithfulness a belt upon his hips*. The Lectionary intimates that justice and faithfulness require repentance. When one considers the struggles in justice between organizing society according to principles of socialism or capitalism, there is plenty of room for repentance for all. Socialism is good theory that does not work; capitalism is bad theory that does work. Socialism is good theory because socialism cares about the poor. Capitalism is bad theory because capitalism does not care about the poor.

Even Sacred Scripture exaggerates a little, for example *all Judea...were going out to him* (Matt 3:5).<sup>18</sup> This exaggeration means that the Faithful are supposed to use

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<sup>15</sup> Robert A. J. Gagnon, "Why the 'Weak' at Rome Cannot Be Non-Christian Jews," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 62, No. 1 (January 2000), 73.

<sup>16</sup> Robert A. J. Gagnon, "Why the 'Weak' at Rome Cannot Be Non-Christian Jews," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 62, No. 1 (January 2000), 64.

<sup>17</sup> Jack Dean Kingsbury, "Observations on the 'Miracle Chapters' of Mathew 8-9," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 40, No. 4 (October 1978) 564.

common sense to understand the Scriptures brought into the discussion by Paul in Romans 15:4. The function of Sacred Scripture is to guard and to guide (Rom 15:4; 1 Cor 10:11; Gal 3:22-25).<sup>19</sup> This function also means that the teaching Magisterium of the Church has a legitimate role to play explaining Scripture.

Mentioning roots brings to mind the 1974 book, Roots, by Alex Haley, a book I finished reading ten years later, in 1984. Matthew mentions root in verse 10, that *even now the ax lies at the root of the trees*, bringing to mind that root of Jesse from whom the line of David and Jesus will arise. Psalm 72 is about hope for an ideal king from the line of David.<sup>20</sup> Relating the root of Jesse to the root of Alex Haley does offer segue into the sin of racism.

So long as I noted exaggeration about *all Judea* in verse 5, I feel impelled to note that I am not claiming exaggeration for *unquenchable fire* in verse 12, with reference to hell. That noted, John (Matt 3:7) calls the Pharisees and Sadducees a *brood of vipers*. Since Jesus was likely a follower of John the Baptist, Jesus probably had the same opinion of the Pharisees and Sadducees as John did. This opinion would help account for Jesus driving the moneychangers out of the Temple and so irritating the religious establishment that it eventually crucified him.<sup>21</sup>

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RICA) proclaims the neophytes *elect*. In verses 8-10, John proclaims that election is insufficient without the fruit of repentance. The Covenantal relationship alone is insufficient.<sup>22</sup> First Isaiah, used above, highly regards the covenantal promises to David.<sup>23</sup> The Covenant is not a one-way street whereby the love of God requires no response. The mission of Jesus

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<sup>18</sup> Mark D. Smith, "Of Jesus and Quirinius," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 63, No. 4 (October 2001) 288.

<sup>19</sup> Vincent M. Smiles, "The Concept of 'Zeal' in Second-Temple Judaism and Paul's Critique of It in Romans 10:2," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 64, No. 2 (April 2002) 299.

<sup>20</sup> Adrian M. Leske, "Context and Meaning of Zechariah 9:9," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 62, No. 4 (October 2000) 665.

<sup>21</sup> Craig A. Evans, "Jesus' Action in the Temple: Cleansing or Portent of Destruction?" the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 51, No. 2 (April 1989), 246-247.

<sup>22</sup> Charles H. Talbert, "Paul, Judaism, and the Revisionists," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 63, No. 1 (January 2001) 8, 18.

<sup>23</sup> Richard J. Clifford, S.J., "The Unity of the Book of Isaiah and Its Cosmogonic Language," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 55, No. 1 (January 1993) 14.

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to the religious establishment was a failure, explicitly stated by Matthew 11:20. The Jews did not repent.<sup>24</sup> Repentance has an impact of order, community, and transformation as its fruit.<sup>25</sup>

All four Evangelists quote John to the point that he is unworthy to untie the sandals of Jesus, the Messiah. The Lectionary uses Matthew 3:11 here; Mark 1:7 also in the Second Sunday of Advent, but Cycle B; Luke 3:16 for the Third Sunday of Advent, Cycle C; and John 1:27 for the Third Sunday of Advent, Cycle B. This commonality by the Four Evangelists lends authenticity to the original portrayal.<sup>26</sup>

These readings offer the Faithful an opportunity to enter the mind, soul, and heart of Jesus. Isaiah offers a promise unfulfilled at the time it was made, but reinterpreted as fulfilled in both Jesus and the present hearts of the Faithful. Psalm 72 portrays Jesus with royal dignity, a dignity inherent in the lives of Jesus on his Cross, the first Christians fed to the lions, and present-day Faithful as well. Romans 15:5 tells the Faithful to *think in harmony with one another, in keeping with Christ Jesus*. Jesus would never have been crucified had he thought in harmony with the religious magisterium of his day. Contemporary Catholics often do think out of harmony with the true Magisterium, for example with regard to the sexual abuse scandal, but in harmony with Christ Jesus. The mind, soul, and heart of Jesus rest in the Holy Spirit, who blows where he will.

For more on sources see the Appendix file.

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<sup>24</sup> Joseph A. Comber, C.F.X., "The Composition and Literary Characteristics of Matt 11:20-24," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 39, No. 4 (October 1977) 498.

<sup>25</sup> Warren Carter, "Recalling the Lord's Prayer: The Authorial Audience and Matthew's Prayer as Familiar Liturgical Experience," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 57, No. 3 (July 1995) 529.

<sup>26</sup> Robert H. Stein, "The Matthew-Luke Agreements Against Mark: Insight from John," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 54, No. 3 (July 1992) 488.