Divine Gifts to Jerusalem and to Mary

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Second Sunday of Advent
Sunday Readings for December 9, 2012 for Cycle C:
Bar 5:1-9; Ps 126; Phil 1:4-11; Lk 3:1-6

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The liturgical year has two "hinges," the feasts of Christmas and Easter; the celebration of the Incarnation and the Paschal Mystery of Jesus reveal for each generation the wonders of divine love for all creatures. No wonder we prepare at length for these special moments; indeed the penitential aspects of Advent and Lent should dispose us to enter ever more deeply into the reality of God's presence with us. No one can show the way to appreciate our relationship with Christ better than his and our blessed Mother.

“In celebrating the annual cycle of the mysteries of Christ, Holy Church honors the Blessed Mary, Mother of God, with a special love. In her the Church admires and exalts the most excellent fruit of redemption, and joyfully contemplates, as in a faultless image, that which she herself wholly desires and hopes to be” (Vatican, II, Sacred Liturgy #103).

Baruch was the secretary of Jeremiah and he shared the prophet's passionate love for Jerusalem as the place where Israel could commune most profoundly with God. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that writings attributed to Baruch focus fondly on the holy city and its Temple. Yes, Nebuchadnezzar had come from Babylon to destroy the city, and it would be threatened several times after the second Temple was completed in 515 B.C. However, these tragedies occasioned an ever deeper love for Jerusalem.

Baruch personified Jerusalem in this Sunday's passage, part of a consoling assurance of God that the people would return from Exile. Then their mother could remove her robe of mourning to be clothed again in the splendor that is a reflection of divine glory (Bar 5:1). In the Hebrew mentality, clothing symbolized and manifested the inner qualities and the function of the individual in society. The cloak of justice (righteousness) replaced the widow's weeds and Jerusalem began to live up to the name "The LORD is my righteousness" (Jer 33:16). A priestly mitre with the words "Holy to the LORD" engraved on a golden plate (Ex 28:26) is described, indicating the author's conviction that the holy city exercises a sacerdotal function (Bar 5:2). For the Hebrews a person's name manifests the vocation and destiny to which one is called. God will bestow new names upon Jerusalem "the peace of justice, the glory of God's worship" (5:4), reminding us of the designation "City of Shalom (peace)" under Melchisedek, the king of righteousness (see Gn 14:18). Thus Baruch anticipated the prayer of St. Paul for the Christian community. "It is my wish that you may be found rich in the harvest of justice which Jesus Christ has ripened in you, to the glory and praise of God (the Father)” (Phil 1:11).
The restoration of the tribes of Israel to the promised land was promised frequently by the prophets. In the time of the Babylonian exile, disciples of Isaiah's school described the return over a highway prepared for God (40:3-4). Baruch depicted the road-building as God's work (5:7) and God himself will ferry the people back on portable thrones (5:6). The former slaves now would savor their royalty!

The prophetic witness of John the Baptist prepares the people for the coming of God's reign in a new way. He proclaimed a baptism of repentance which would lead to the forgiveness of sin (Lk 3:3). As Jesus would explain later, the various human experiences of political enslavement are manifestations of the slavery caused by sin. The crooked can be made straight and the rough can become smooth, provided that people recognize the need of God's gift of forgiveness. As we prepare for Christmas through the sacraments of penance and the Eucharist, we dispose ourselves to become vehicles whereby all humankind shall see the salvation of God (Lk 3:6).

In anticipation of the call to be the Mother of Jesus, Mary was enriched from the very first instant of her conception with the splendor of an entirely unique holiness (see Vatican II, Constitution on the Church #56). Mary is indeed the great beneficiary of Christ's saving work, being exempt from the shadow of estrangement from God. Thus she is linked with Christ in a unique way, from Nazareth to Calvary and beyond. As our Mother she is the Daughter of Zion, wrapped in the divine cloak of justice and pointing to the Prince of Peace.