The Messiah and His People

Lawrence E. Frizzell, Seton Hall University

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Reverend Lawrence E. Frizzell
Institute of Judaico-Christian Studies
Seton Hall University
South Orange, NJ

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Sunday Readings for December 8, 2013 for Cycle A:
Isa 11:1-10; Ps 72; Rom 15:4-9; Mt 3:1-12

THE MESSIAH AND HIS PEOPLE

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Your house (dynasty) and your kingdom shall endure forever before me;
your throne shall stand firm forever (2 Sm 7:16).

The wonderful divine promise made to King David through Nathan the prophet became the topic of reflection by prophets and psalmists over the centuries. Did the people sometimes doubt the efficacy of this message when weak and venal rulers courted disaster for the nation? No doubt the passage from Isaiah offered assurance that God was faithful in spite of human frailty. Even if the dynastic tree of Jesse (David's father) seemed to be but a dead stump, a new shoot would sprout forth (Is 11:1).

Earlier the prophet had described a child upon whom marvelous royal titles were bestowed: "Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-forever, Prince of Peace" (Is 9:5). Who would this be and how would he rule? "His dominion is vast and forever peaceful, from David's throne and over his kingdom, which he confirms and sustains by judgment and righteousness, both now and forever" (9:6). The promise of a perpetual kingdom made to David is now focused on one person who is anointed (mashah in Hebrew) within the dynasty. Consecration of a king through ceremonies that included unctions led people to call the anointed one "messiah". Later, in the Second Temple period, when hope for revival of the Davidic dynasty had vanished, the title was applied to the Anointed One par excellence.

How will this ideal king of Isaiah's portrait achieve peace by exercising judgment according to just decrees and righteousness (integrity)? Not merely by human ingenuity but by gifts of the Spirit of the LORD. Arranged in three pairs around the central gift of the Spirit, the list of gifts brings to mind the image of a seven-branched candlestick. The last in the series is "fear of the Lord", the awe or reverence before God that is fundamental to all spiritual growth because it expresses the initial response of the creature to the Creator. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Ps 111:10; Prv 1:7; 9:10). Was this saying earlier than Isaiah, or did it reflect upon our text? In any case, the logic of seeing wisdom as the highest gift echoes the insight that wisdom is a divine attribute, whereas "fear" or awe cannot be. The familiar "seven gifts" in Christian theology derive from the Greek translation, which renders the repeated phrase "fear of the LORD" as two related gifts: piety (in relation to parents) and awe (in relation to God). The text of Isaiah teaches that these gifts belong first and primarily to the Messiah. Their presence in the life of God's people implies that through baptism we share in the work initiated by the Son of David.

The presence of God's Spirit enables the Davidic ruler to penetrate into minds and hearts so that his judgments are not based on appearances or hearsay (Is 11:3). Thus the poor and downtrodden
will be assured right judgment, so often denied them in daily life. On the other hand, the King's words of decision will wreak havoc on the wicked (11:4). Righteousness and fidelity will be an integral part of his life and activities, clinging to him like the belts that keep his garments in order.

The prophets maintained the fundamental insight of the Torah (Law) that a proper relationship with God and neighbor would have an effect even on the natural world. Thus the harmony of the idyllic life of our first parents would be restored. The final days are often portrayed as a restoration of humanity to the pristine perfection willed by God for all creation.

This transformation can be achieved only by divine power and human cooperation. So the ministry of John the Baptist began with a call for a change of heart, a personal inner conversion completed by acts of penance for past sins. John's work prepared people for the coming of the Messiah and disposed them to produce deeds of justice and righteousness. Then they would be ready for the penetrating discernment of the Judge who would be guided by the Holy Spirit. Drawing upon passages like Isaiah 11:3-5, the Baptist emphasized this aspect of the Messiah's task. Certainly the separation of wheat from chaff, of the righteous from the wicked, is essential to the mission of Jesus. But John had yet to learn that divine mercy would offer abundant opportunities for healing and transformation. "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them" (Mt 11:4-5; see Isa 26:19; 29:18-19; 35:5-6; 61:1). At the beginning of each new year of grace in the Church we should be reminded of both aspects of Jesus' mission. Then we can respond to the gifts of the Spirit to continue his work in the varied circumstances of our lives.