

## **ADVENT 2007 Reflections on the Old Testament Readings by Fr. Raymond Collins**

For the past four years Fr. Raymond Collins has been writing for [Emmanuel magazine](#), a journal of priestly spirituality. Fr. Collins received approval from the publisher to make this portion of his commentary available online through St. Luke's website. Father Collins' complete commentary on the Sunday readings can be found in *Emmanuel* (vol. 113:6) November-December, 2007.

### **THE SUNDAYS OF ADVENT 2007**

The Advent liturgy features readings from the Book of Isaiah. This book is read in the Liturgy of the Hours, the Sunday eucharistic celebration, and the celebration of daily eucharist during the first two weeks of the season.

Biblical scholars generally consider that the book is a compilation of oracles of three seers who prophesied at different times during a period of history that was a little more than two centuries long. So-called First Isaiah is based on the figure of Isaiah who prophesied in Jerusalem during most of the second half of the eighth century b.c.e. Traditions attributed to him provide a basis for the oracles contained in Second Isaiah (chapters 40-55) and Third Isaiah (chapters 56-66).

The first readings for the Sunday eucharists of Advent and the Mass at Midnight in Cycle A are taken from First Isaiah. A specific advent theme motivates the choice of the Advent readings ("Introduction to the Lectionary," par. 93). As a result, an immediate correlation between the first and third readings is not as much in evidence during Advent as it is on the Sundays of Ordinary Time.

### **FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT**

**December 2, 2007**

#### **Isaiah 2:1-5**



Isaiah's vision of the powerful God who exercises dominion from Jerusalem is a central focus of First Isaiah. Today's reading, the second oracle in Isaiah (Isa 1:1; 2:1), celebrates the elevation of Jerusalem, the nations' acknowledgement of the God of Jacob, and the coming of an age of peace. Remarkably similar to an oracle found in Micah 4:1-4, the oracle probably derives from an earlier prophetic tradition known to both Isaiah and Micah.

The oracle speaks of the temple mount in Jerusalem as being the highest of mountains. This figurative description—the temple mount is actually a modest-sized hill—exalts Jerusalem as the carrefour where heaven and earth intersect, where the word of God meets all humanity. When the new age dawns all people will be instructed by the word of the Lord.

For the prophet, an age of peace follows the Lord's judgment (see Isa 5:24; 30:27-28). The radical transformation of implements of war into implements that serve people's well-being symbolizes the eschatological reversal that will take place. A sculpture at the United Nations' building in Manhattan uses Isaiah 2:4 to remind us of the organization's peacekeeping function.

Isaiah 2:1-5 features the nations' recognition of the God of Israel but the final verse of the reading reminds Israel not to let itself be excluded from the universal procession.

**SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT  
December 9, 2007**

**Isaiah 11:1-10**

One of the important themes in First Isaiah is the importance of the Davidic dynasty and the expectation of an anointed future king. These motifs come together in this reading from Isaiah 11 which the church has long applied to Jesus, the Messiah.

Jesse, whose name encompasses the liturgical reading (vv. 1, 10) was the father of David (1 Sam 16:1-20). The agricultural imagery associated with his name evokes the idea of a genealogical tree, albeit in descending order. Such imagery is commonly employed in the prophetic tradition to speak about a future ideal king (Jer 23:5; 33:14; Zech 3:8; 6:12).

God's spirit, given to Saul (1 Sam 10:6) and David (1 Sam 16:13), will be given to the ideal king (Isa 61:1; Luke 4:18). Traits attributed to God's spirit are gifts that the spirit will give to the king, gifts that will enable him to function well as God's vice-gerent over the people. Among these gifts, wisdom was particularly valuable, as the story of Solomon (1 Kings 3) and the legends associated with him amply demonstrate.

In the Ancient Near East justice may have been the most important trait of a good king (vv. 3b-5). The king's justice ("righteousness" in some translations) is seen in the way that he treats the poor and the marginalized, especially the widows, orphans, and aliens (Psalm 72). Israelites expected that the king's justice would reflect God's righteousness; the justice of the king was to be the incarnation of God's righteousness.

A byproduct of the king's righteousness is that peace and harmony will spread throughout nature (vv. 6-9; see Rom 8:19-23). Painting an idyllic picture of nature restored to its pristine/ideal harmony, the oracle uses eight striking images (see Isa 65:25), any one of which would by itself capture the idea of nature at peace with itself.



**THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT  
December 16, 2007**

**Isaiah 35:1-6a, 10**



Last Sunday's reading from Isaiah 11 focused on animate creation in its evocative portrayal of the new creation to be realized in the Messianic times. This week's reading focuses on inanimate creation. The Near East's desert regions are portrayed as breaking forth with lush growth (Isa 41:19-20; 55:13) comparable to the great cedars of Lebanon and the wine-producing hills of Mount Carmel. Thus renewed, the lush desert areas will erupt in a song of praise to God (Isa 44:23; 49:13; 55:12).

Biblical scholars generally consider that this oracle comes from a later period than most of the material in First Isaiah. Related to Second Isaiah (Isaiah 40-55), the oracle comes from the time of the Babylonian Exile. The

## **ADVENT 2007 Reflections on the Old Testament Readings by Fr. Raymond Collins**

vision of the desert-made-lush is a vision of a desert that God has prepared for the return of the Exiles. It creates a sharp contrast with the arid desert through which Israel passed during the Exodus from Egypt.

"Fear Not" is a dominant motif in Second Isaiah (Isa 40:9; 41:10; etc.). The oracle of Isaiah 35 proclaims that those who suffered from exile and imprisonment will have their condition reversed when the just God comes to their rescue. Those with hands weak from labor, knees bent from exhaustion, eyes blinded, ears hard of hearing, impaired speech, and lame of leg will see their situation reversed.

The liturgical reading omits verses 6b-9 which speak about the abundance of water and the freedom from predatory animals that the returning exiles will enjoy. The liturgical reading continues with the last verse of the oracle, one that speaks of the joy of those who had been exiled upon their return home.

### **FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT December 23, 2007**

#### **Isaiah 7:10-14**

During the Syro-Ephraimite War (734-733 b.c.e.), Ahaz, who had become king of Israel at the age of twenty, tried to defend Jerusalem by means of an alliance with Assyria rather by relying on the help of God (2 Kings 16:1-20). Currying favor with the Assyrian king, Tiglath-Pilser, Ahaz committed various abominable deeds (2 Kings 16:3-4). Nonetheless, he wanted a sign from the Lord, preserving the bronze altar as a medium for his inquiry (2 Kings 16:15).

When Jerusalem was under siege, God sent Isaiah to Ahaz who was as much in fear as were the people in the city (Isa 7:2). Isaiah was accompanied by his son, Shear-jashub. The boy's name meant "a remnant will return," symbolizing either the attacking forces would be reduced to a remnant or that at least a remnant of Israel would survive.

Ahaz was not convinced; his faith was weak (Isa 7:9). The Lord challenged Ahaz, presumably using the prophet as his spokesperson, to seek a sign from the Lord. Ahaz adamantly refused to do so. The impatient prophet then confronted the king, "the house of David," who was tempting God by not relying on him.

Despite Ahaz' recalcitrance, God would take the initiative. God would provide a sign that God was with Israel at this difficult time in its history. A young woman, either the prophet's wife (see Isa 8:2) or the wife of the king (2 Kings 18:2; 2 Chr 29:1), would bear a child. He would be given a symbolic name, like Shear-jashub's symbolic name. The name would be Emmanuel, "God is with us;" the name is a sign that God will remain faithful to Israel.



### **THE NATIVITY OF THE LORD Midnight Mass**

December 25, 2007

#### **Isaiah 9:1-6**

Somewhat similar to Isaiah 11:1-10, read on the Second Sunday of Advent, the oracle celebrates the accession of the king to the throne. Ideally the king should possess the best traits of all of Israel's heroes.

## ADVENT 2007 Reflections on the Old Testament Readings by Fr. Raymond Collins

Historically the oracle probably celebrated the coronation of Hezekiah (715-687 b.c.e.) to the throne. Those who walked in darkness are the inhabitants of the tribal lands, Zebulun and Naphtali (Isa 8:23), conquered by the Assyrian king, Tiglath-Pilser, in 733-732 b.c.e. During the reign of the ideal king these lands will be restored to Israel and the unity of the kingdom will be realized. The unification of the kingdom will be a source of great celebration.



Lest the restoration of these lands to Israel seem impossible to achieve, the oracle recalls how God had raised up Gideon to lead undermanned Israel in its fight against Midian (Jud 7:15-25). Nothing is impossible for God. Through the ideal king God will bring peace to his people.

The titles used to laud the new king were commonly used of newly enthroned kings in the Ancient Near East. The titles are similar to those used of Egyptian pharaohs. Wonder-counselor: the king who has just assumed authority and responsibility ("dominion") will be endowed with wisdom and prudence. God-hero: he will protect and defend the people. Father-Forever: he will be devoted to the people. Prince of Peace, his reign will be characterized by peace.

Since Judean royal ideology typically celebrated the king as God's son (2 Sam 7:14; Ps 2:7-9; 89:19-20), the oracle celebrates the king as the child born for us, the son given to us

### THE HOLY FAMILY OF JESUS, MARY, AND JOSEPH

December 30, 2007

#### Sirach 3:2-7, 12-14

Hebrew texts of the Book of Sirach were generally lost to the western world for almost 1500 years. In the twentieth century Hebrew fragments were found at Masada, Qumran, and elsewhere, so that we now have about two-thirds of the text of the book in Hebrew.

Only Greek copies of Sirach—popularly known by the name of Ecclesiasticus, a transliterated Greek term meaning "church book"—were known at the time of the Reformation. As a result Sirach was excluded from the Protestant canon of Scripture, professedly a return to the original sources.

Sirach is a collection of wisdom sayings, like those of the Book of Proverbs. It was probably compiled in the early years of the second century b.c.e. but many of the traditional adages predate their compilation into the book.

The sayings in today's lection speak of a man's duty to his parents. In some ways the sayings are an extended



## **ADVENT 2007 Reflections on the Old Testament Readings by Fr. Raymond Collins**

commentary on the fourth commandments (Exod 21:12; Deut 5:16), though it was not the compiler's explicit intention to comment on the Scripture.

The text's emphasis on the father reflect patriarchal society of which the well-ordered family was a building block. Verses 12-14 lay particular stress on the duty to care for older parents, even as they enter into senility or what we would today call Alzheimer's disease.

Blessings are pronounced on those who fulfill the responsibilities of filial piety. Like the fourth commandment and Ephesians 6:2-3, the sage speaks of God's gift of longevity to those who take care of their elderly parents.

Candle photos by [SkyD](#) are covered by a creative commons license.

Nativity and stained glass window photos ©2007 by Chuck Anastasia, Barrington, RI USA who grants permission to freely reproduce these images for non-commercial purpose with attribution.