

3rd Sunday Advent Year "A"

"Beauty leads us to Goodness and Truth"

December 10-11, 2016

Readings: Isaiah 35:1-6, 10; James 5: 7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

We Minnesotans, if anything, are for the most part very hearty people. We take things in stride, including our unpredictable winters. A mild December has suddenly turned on us. If we did not know any better, the Lectionary for this Sunday is perhaps even poking fun at us, with its beautiful imagery of abundant flowers blooming in the desert and steppe. The "steppe" was an extensive plain, especially one without trees. It will shimmer with colors.

The 35th chapter of Isaiah evokes imagery that emphasizes contrasts. It invites us to hope that what is taking place can give way to something much, much better. In periods of uncertainty when a situation seems fraught with danger and uncertainty rules the day, we turn to the Lord, He, who is in control.

Life may seem to have led us into a dry period where our efforts have not borne the fruit for which we were hoping. Suddenly, we are told of a future that will transform the present. "The desert and the parched land will exult. The steppe will rejoice and bloom. They will bloom with abundant flowers and rejoice with joyful song."

It is the Glory of the Lord that will accomplish this. The Expression "the glory of the Lord" means God himself insofar as he is revealed in his majesty, his power and his holiness. The prophet Isaiah says in another passage: "all the earth is filled with his glory." (Is 6:3).

The glory of God in this sense can equally mean God's divine protection or the praise that we creatures give to God because of his glory. The sense of this text from Isaiah is that all creatures reflect the wisdom and perfection of God.

The “glory” of the Lord is spoken of all throughout the Bible, with different shades of meaning, each rich and filled with meaning for us. Artists have attempted for centuries to portray God the Father, Jesus Christ and the saints in rich tones of red, yellow and white to reflect this glory.

Early in the 20th century, a young Swiss Jesuit theologian named Hans Urs von Balthasar felt that the study of the theology had become to rote, too dry, antiseptic and technical. God is so much more than a mere object of knowledge. We had lost the sense of truth, beauty and goodness, and needed to recover this aspect of God’s glory. Though respectful of the classic theologians in the tradition, he was on to something, and became arguably the best theologian of the 20th century. He died in 1988, just days before he was to be created a Cardinal by St. John Paul II.

For von Balthasar, beauty was not at all an act of self-indulgence or sentimentality. He was convinced that by losing the sense of Beauty, by closing the *spiritual senses* that grasp the colors and the contours, the taste and the fragrance of Truth in its radiant body, the theologians had betrayed even the very Master they claimed to serve.¹ Beauty has to sit alongside truth and goodness, and could not be left on the sidelines.

Beauty draws people, it opens their minds and hearts to something much deeper. The Psalms often called upon all creatures to praise the glory of the Lord.² Our Nicene Creed makes reference to Jesus coming in glory, so these concepts are hardly new.³

¹ cf. Stratford Caldecott "An Introduction to Hans Urs von Balthasar," 2001.

² cf. PS 57; 97; 145-50

³ The description of the “son of man” in the prophet Daniel especially foreshadows the “coming in glory” to which our Creed refers: “I saw one like a son of man coming on the clouds of heaven... He received dominion, glory and kingship; nations and peoples of every language serve him.”cf. Daniel 7:13-14

And yet, during Advent, our Savior remains hidden; He is on the way, but not yet here. Today's Third Sunday of Advent gives us a momentary glimpse, encouraging us in the midst of the stillness of waiting. We illustrate this with the rich color of Rose, the flowers on the altar, the texts of the liturgy and prayers. Beauty leads us to the Truth. And what is this truth?

Above all- truth is not merely a concept- it is a person, and He is love. "Love, correctly understood in its full cosmic and personal meaning, is itself the Glory of God; it is the essence of Truth, Beauty and Goodness."⁴

God is coming to save us, and for this reason we wait in joyful expectation, knowing that our salvation is near at hand.

⁴ cf. Caldecott, "An Introduction to Hans Urs von Balthasar." *Second Spring*.