

Homily. 3rd Sunday of Advent. Year. B. 16/17 December 2023.

There was in Jesus time, and there still is today for Orthodox Jews at least, the thinking that the model Prophet, Elijah, would return before the coming of the promised Messiah of God. Law observing practicing Jews continue to put out an empty seat at their Passover meal in the hope that this year Elijah will come to take up his place at their table and in history.

The Messiah for Jews was to be a God anointed and chosen leader who will rectify injustices and usher in God's reign and rule over Israel, fulfilling all of the promises made in the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament, promises like those we hear from the Prophet Isaiah in this Season. At the end of the horrors of World War II a new type of thinking emerged called Zionism which took hold amongst some Jews. They thought that God was taking too long to act and help his people regain their promised land, destiny and State. They decided to take the land of Palestine back for themselves, claiming that they were acting on God's behalf. This is how we end up where we are today, a situation of perpetual conflict. We must note though that most Jews, especially those who are religious and practicing, don't accept this model promoted by the Zionist element.

Jesus tells us in the gospels (you can look this up for yourself) that Elijah had in fact returned before him and that John was that person filled with Elijah's spirit and zeal. In saying this Jesus confirms that his role was made ready and is in response to what John said and did. John himself confirmed this saying that Jesus was the light, the One who was to come.

All of this connects to Mary since John was related to her through her cousin, Elizabeth. St. Luke tells us this side of the story when he says that after her own Annunciation Mary visited Elizabeth and Zachariah who had unexpectedly conceived John late in their lives. This is the story of the Jesus family at a time when extended family relationships were known and kept alive more so than they are today. The link to King David came through Joseph, for the Messiah was to arise from David's line, but the returned Elijah, John the Baptist, arose from Mary's side of the clan.

To allow God to act and give us a Messiah or Christ, Mary had to be willing to cooperate with God's plan and will. That she did so despite her young age, her fears and confusion as to how all of this would all play out attests to Mary's faith that God alone could make the impossible become possible. Unlike modern Zionist thought which takes over control of the future from God, Mary opted to trust in God's way, leaving the future of human salvation safely if a little obscurely in the hands of the Almighty.

As we sang in the Psalm, her soul rejoiced in what the Lord was doing and would do, rather than in what she wanted and could herself do. It was Mary's humble receptiveness and responsiveness to God that makes her most blessed among women. Likewise, it was John's faithful service to God and humanity, along with his willingness to step aside when Jesus came, that made him Elijah returned as witness to the Messiah. In these two figures our salvation came alive and with them what's left of this Advent draws hope and inspiration until the light of Christmas renews us.