

Commentary on the Gospel for Thu, Dec 10th 2015

Mercy: Closing the Gap

The portion of Isaiah's prophecy that we hear today vividly sketches the stark contrast between God and the people of Israel. Isaiah, speaking the word of the Lord, refers to Israel as a "worm" and a "maggot." By contrast, here as throughout Isaiah, God is continually referred to as the "Holy One of Israel." These titles are meant to depict in the strongest terms possible, the gulf that separates God from Israel. God, the Holy One, absolutely separated from evil on the one hand, and, on the other, Israel, taken captive into the misery of exile on account of its infidelity.

In the face of that stark contrast, the unthinkable is announced: this all-holy God is also the Redeemer, one who reaches down to that tiny creature, made miserable by sin, to rescue, to save, to redeem: "I am the Lord, your God, who grasp your right hand." The mercy of God closes that wide gulf, revealing in dramatic fashion the very nature of God: "The Lord is gracious and merciful; slow to anger, and of great kindness." We who believe in Jesus move quickly to recognize our Jesus as the human face of this divine Redeemer, now not only reaching down, but also joining us in our sinful condition to rescue, to save, to redeem.

However, it is not likely that hearing again the news of this God who comes to us in the Christmas mystery will move us very greatly unless we ourselves realize in a renewed way that this saving hand reaches across a great gap: the incredible goodness of God which gives us a totally undeserved gift. Pope Francis continually reminds us that to truly "encounter" the Lord, we must meet him in mercy: "I dare to say that the privileged locus of the encounter [with the Lord] is the caress of the mercy of Jesus Christ on my sin." We pray today for the grace to realize our often tepid response to the fathomless goodness and mercy of God in Jesus, grasping us and drawing us close.

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