

Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, Dec 15th 2018

Fire. Famine. Fury. The themes of today's Sirach reading could be taken right out of the front pages of our newspapers. Today's readings offer another reminder that the biblical and liturgical vision of Advent stands a long way removed from pop Christmas culture!

As much as Advent is about expectation, it is also about fulfillment. As Gentile Christians, it can be easy for us to forget that Jesus came first as the fulfillment of Israel's messianic expectations. The narrative in Matthew that precedes today's gospel – the appearances of Elijah and Moses in the midst of the Transfiguration of Jesus – embodies this theme. In turn, Sirach 48:10 echoes the end of the canonical Old Testament in Malachi 3:23-24 – namely the prophecy that Elijah will return to “turn the heart of fathers to their sons” before the coming of “the day of the Lord.” And early in all four gospels, the enigmatic and eccentric figure of John the Baptist emerges as the new Elijah, bridging the Old and New Testaments.

Thematically, today's readings remind us of a more disturbing form of fulfillment – namely the persistent idolatry of God's people and our tendency to reject God's prophets. I find myself humbled, saddened, and even a bit fearful as I reflect on these scriptures. For I know that my idolatrous and violent world – and even I myself – continue to resist the conversion of heart called for by Elijah, John the Baptist, and Jesus.

Today is a bridge. We are two weeks into the Advent season; there are 10 days to go until Christmas. I approach a manger over which the Cross looms. The most pressing question of the hour is not what I must do to prepare my house or what gifts I should purchase for my kids. For me as a father, the most pressing questions are how I should prepare my heart for the coming of the Lord, and how I can turn my heart to my sons and daughters.

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