

## PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

### THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT, YEAR B

The Third Sunday of Advent is known as '*Gaudete* ('rejoicing') Sunday', from the first word of the entrance antiphon at Mass, 'Rejoice ...!' (Phil. 4: 4.5). The third candle on the Advent wreath is pink (rather than the usual purple) and symbolises joy in the coming of Christ. This same joy is also particularly evident today in the Second Reading (1 Thess. 5: 16–24) with its exhortation to 'Be happy'. There is also the emphasis on the Good News in Isaiah, and Mary's rejoicing in the Magnificat.

#### First Reading Isaiah 61: 1–2, 10–11

##### **The spirit of the Lord has been given to me ...**

Mention of the Holy Spirit is a signal that God is doing something of enormous importance. We see this in the opening lines of the Old Testament in Genesis, announcing the beginning of creation, '... and God's spirit hovered over the water'.

##### **... to bring Good News to the poor**

God's mighty work, announced here, is to bring about the total salvation of his people, to heal their wounds and set them free in body and spirit. This echoes the words from Leviticus 25: 8–22: 'On the Day of Atonement you shall sound the trumpet throughout the land ... proclaim the liberation of all the inhabitants of the land ... this is to be a jubilee for you.'

##### **... to proclaim a year of favour from the Lord**

The 'jubilee' took place every fifty years, giving the people an opportunity to make a fresh start in their lives (Leviticus 25:8–55). Debts were cancelled, slaves were freed, and people who had been driven away from their homes by poverty etc were now able to return.

##### **He has clothed me in the garments of salvation ...**

These final verses are the response to the Good News. The people's joy is likened to that of a bride and groom on their wedding day. The theme of this passage closely resembles that of Mary's Magnificat in today's responsorial psalm. There too, the poor and lowly are exalted. (Luke 1: 52)



#### Gospel John 1: 6–8, 9–28

The gospel passage this week comes from St John. Whereas Matthew, Mark and Luke give a more or less chronological account of the life of Jesus from a similar point of view ('Synoptic gospels'), John includes what he calls 'signs' – stories of miracles to help us believe.

##### **A man came sent by God**

The first two verses of today's passage come from the Prologue to the Gospel. This may originally have been a free-standing document focusing on Jesus as Word of God, to which the two verses about John the Baptist were added at a later stage. Being 'sent from God' gives John authenticity and authority.

##### **He came as a witness**

Giving witness is an important notion in John's Gospel. Numerous people and events are said to bear witness to Jesus the Word (the Samaritan woman, the crowds, the Holy Spirit, and the disciples, to name but a few. Interestingly, the Greek word for witness is *martyrios*, which has also given us the word martyr – that is, the ultimate witness. In contrast to the Synoptic Gospels where John the Baptist is seen as a forerunner of the Messiah, here his role is to be a witness, pointing to someone else. Last week we saw John the Baptist proclaiming Jesus's coming. He was acting as an official herald. This week, in bearing witness, a more personal connection with Jesus is highlighted.

##### **The Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem**

In John's Gospel, the Jews are always portrayed as people hostile to Jesus; they represent the leaders in Jerusalem. Priests and Levites were people empowered by the Law to make religious decisions. This highlights the official character of their visit.

##### **'Who are you?'**

John defines himself not only in terms of who he is *not* (i.e. the Messiah; Elijah; the Prophet), but also in terms of who he *is* (a witness; a voice crying in the wilderness). The Jews believed that Elijah, and a Prophet greater than Moses, would return to earth to take part in establishing the Kingdom of God. (See Malachi 3: 23–24 and Deuteronomy 18: 15.) Here John does not identify himself primarily in terms of his baptising activities, but the Pharisees questioning him nonetheless want him to justify his actions.

##### **Bethany**

This village of Bethany is in Transjordan, not to be confused with the Bethany near Jerusalem where Lazarus and his sisters lived.