

Second Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; Matthew 3:1-12; Romans 15:4-13

Isaiah 11:1-10 conforms to the essential theme for the Second Sunday of Advent – the revelation of the Messiah throughout scripture. In this passage in Isaiah, a Davidic king is predicted who is “messianic” in nature, one who will rule Judah as God intended its kings to rule. This oracle is meant to be a companion piece to Isaiah 9:2-7, both of which were likely composed to originally be used as part of a royal accession ceremony. Apparently, when Judah’s newly-selected king was to be elevated to the throne, a ceremony would be held which would directly tie the king to the Davidic monarchy (that is, proclaiming that this was a legitimate blood descendant of David) and which would state afresh the characteristics of a rule that would be considered a truly just, Godly and consequently Davidic rule (II Kings 11:12-19). Most biblical scholars believe that today’s Old Testament lesson, as well as Isaiah 9:2-7 was composed for the anointing of Hezekiah as the Davidic monarch of Israel. Although Hezekiah was one of the most ethical and just rulers in the lineage of David, he fell short of the vision of an authentic Godly ruler as laid out in these two Isaiac hymns. Thus, it was inevitable that after the nation entered into its Babylonian exile, its people looked forward to the eventual restoration of the Davidic monarchy under a messiah who would both return the nation to its former glory and would exercise his office in the way God intended it to be exercised.

Isaiah 11:1-10 presents three characteristics of its messianic king. First, it states, “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots” (11:1). This opening verse in essence declares that God is not done with Israel yet, nor with Judah’s monarchy. The monarchy of Judah was, at the time of this writing, only a shadow of what it had been under David and Solomon. The kingdom of Judah not only consisted of a territory less than half the size of the earlier nation and a shadow of the extended empire David had built, but its kings were now under the influence and control of the great empires of its time rather than being the independent and even dominant nation it once was. In a profound sense, the Davidic monarch was only a cut-down “stump” of its former self. But it would not always remain the same. Rather, the prophet declared, the “stump” would become a “root”, giving birth to a “shoot” or “branch” (the Hebrew can also be translated “stalk” and “trunk”). That is, out of that which already appears dead, new life can flourish, growing into an equally-strong trunk of a newly-flourishing tree. That this new monarch is of “the house and lineage of David” is made clear by naming the stump “the stump of Jesse”, for Jesse was David’s father and thus that patriarch of that noble family. Thus, Isaiah declares that the hope for the reviving of God’s people and even of the world will be a descendant of Jesse, a messianic king of “the house and lineage of David”.

The second characteristic of this monarch-to-be is particularly intriguing. “The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord” (vss. 2-3a).

“The spirit of the Lord shall rest on” this coming messianic king. The Messiah will be a Spirit-led man. An essential theme throughout the Old Testament was that the “spirit” or “charisma” of God would come upon a person, preparing, equipping and empowering him or her for the mission that had been assigned to them by God. Thus, the Spirit “rested on” and empowered

Moses (Numbers 11:17), the elders of Israel (Num. 11:25,26), Joshua (Deut. 34:9), the judges – both male and female (Judg. 3:10; 11:29; 13:25), selected kings (I Sam. 11:6) and the prophets (I Sam. 10:10; II Sam. 23:2; I Kings 22:24; II Kings 2:15; Micah 3:8) for their respective missions. Likewise, Isaiah tells us, the Spirit will rest upon the messianic king, enabling him to be equal to his calling from God.

The prophet then details what the Spirit will do to empower the messianic king. He will give him “the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord” so that his life will be centered in taking “delight in the fear of the Lord”. These characteristics – wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge and the fear of the Lord – are not meant to be synonyms suggesting that the king will be particularly astute or discerning. Rather, in good Hebraic poetic fashion, the author is creating three parallel constructions.

First, the Messiah will evidence “the spirit of wisdom and understanding” (Hebrew, *‘chokmah* and *binah*). The two words are often used in Hebrew in conjunction with each other, for together they mean sagacity or skill in making thought to be lived out in action. Unlike the Greek concept of wisdom as accumulated philosophical or scientific knowledge that issues in judgment, the Hebrew concept of “wisdom and understanding” is good sense that can discern the inner qualities or nuances of an issue that result in judgment that is acted out transformationally in the world. Without the resulting action, the thought has not been “wise”!

Second, the Messiah will act with “counsel” and “might”. These words are also meant to be in relation with each other, but in English such a juxtaposition makes no sense at all. “Counsel”, in English, simply means “advice” or “consultation” while “might” means the capacity or ability to act effectively. But in Hebrew, the two words mean virtually the same thing. To give “counsel” (in this case, a king giving counsel) was to express an insight or a judgment that was yet to be acted upon. But not to act upon such counsel was to “despise” the counselor (Ps. 107:11) and thus to “shame” him (Ps. 14:6). Counsel was not “completed”, made whole (Isa. 44:26) or “filled” (Ps. 20:4) until it would be acted out by the one receiving the counsel. Therefore, by definition, the “counsel” of the messianic king would not come to fruition until he acted with “might” to make it so!

The third couplet has the Messiah acting with “knowledge and the fear of the Lord”. For a Jew to know (*‘yada*) did not mean to understand abstract principles or to grasp reality, to have intellectual comprehension of a science, art or technique – what English speakers mean by the word “knowledge”. Rather, to the Jew, to “know” was to be in direct relationship to and to embrace that element or creature of life that was before you. Thus, the word “to know” was used as a euphemism for sexual intercourse (e.g., Gen. 4:1), because to have such a relationship with a human being was to experience the very depths or the very essence of that person. Consequently, to “know God” was not to think abstractly about God as the “ground of all being” or of the eternal principle transcending reality; to “know God” was to be in a dynamic and personal relationship with God and of God’s purposes for the world (e.g., Deut. 11:2ff; Isa. 41:20).

To the Hebrews, the chief purpose and end of all humanity and of each person was to know God (Deut. 4:39; 29:2-6; Isa. 43:10; Hos. 6:6; Ps. 46:10). That meant understanding and inwardly embracing God's intentions for humanity and the world and working toward the accomplishment of those intentions (Amos 3:2; Jer. 1:5). Each human, all humanity and the societies humans would create were created, designed and called forth to be in intimate relationship with God, living in harmony with God and in covenantal relationship with God. Thus, all people – even the king – were to live under God's suzerainty, so that God was the king and we his subjects (intriguingly, the Ten Commandments is written in the style of a suzerainty treaty popular throughout the Near and Middle East of the 11th to 14th centuries BCE).

The clear manifestations of one living in the "knowledge of the Lord" was the action of their lives as they worked for justice, empowering the poor and equitably distributing their wealth in order to eliminate the poverty of those around them. But the other clear indicator that one truly "knew" God was that they lived in "the fear of God". The Hebrew word "fear" ("*yirah*") does not mean to be frightened or living in dread as much as it meant "reverence" or "living in awe". If one truly "knew" God and sought to live out that knowledge through one's life, then one "lived in awe" of God (the actual meaning of the word "awful" – that is, "awe-full" or "full of awe"). Thus, because the Messiah truly knew God at the deepest level, he was "full of awe" before him.

What is magnificently described by Isaiah in this passage is the amazing interiority of the Messiah. This leader of the people of God is a man who is centered in God, living in the deepest relationship with God, a relationship of awe and of intimacy. He is one who has profound insight into both others and himself, into both the characteristics of the society he is called to foster and the willingness and determination to work to achieve those characteristics throughout the warp-and-woof of his kingdom. Finally, he is able to sit in judgment on the issues that come before him, to perceive all their nuances and to make decisions that are truly just and work for the transformation of his kingdom. Therefore, what is being described is an amazingly sensitive leader who has both an overwhelming understanding of God's intentions for his nation and the drive and determination to realize those intentions through his policies and actions that results in the building of a godly politics, economics and spirituality of both his nation and in the lives of each of his subjects. For this man is dominated by his dynamic relationship with God that informs the entirety of both his public and his private life, making him the most ideal of possible rulers.

Thus it is that Isaiah now demonstrates the outworking of the spirituality and interiority of the messiah. He writes, "He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins" (vss. 3b-5).

In Israel, a king was judged worthy and great not on the basis of the wealth he had brought to the nation nor the political and military empire that he built but on both his willingness and his actions to protect the poor, marginalized (widows, orphans, aliens) and vulnerable in his kingdom. Isaiah makes it quite clear in this passage that the messiah will bring justice to the

poor, will equitably distribute the wealth of the nation so that the “meek of the earth” will gain economic and political security, and the people of the nation will be drawn ever closer to God (“righteousness shall be the belt around his waist”). But what is particularly intriguing about this passage is the way that the prophet integrates this material with the characteristics of the messiah king which he has earlier examined.

The messiah is to be a man of “wisdom” and “understanding”; with such discernment that he will not be seduced by outward appearances or by deceptive talk. Instead, he will be able to see through the veneer of people to their interior quality, and thus he will be able to uncover the truth about people that lie behind the appearances they project in court (“he shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear”). With “counsel” and “might”, he will both understand and act out a national compassion and priority for the poor, marginalized and powerless in his realm, judging the cases of the poor and “deciding with equity for the meek of the earth” (i.e., making sure that the wealth of the nation is being redistributed according to sabbatical and jubilee law so that poverty and powerless is always being eliminated and power and wealth isn’t accruing in the hands of a self-selected few). Finally, because he is a ruler whose chief purpose and end is to know God, to make God known and to extend God’s justice upon the earth, the messiah king will “strike the earth with the rod of his mouth” (a better translation is “he shall strike the tyrant (or bully) with the rod of his mouth”), battling against acts and intentions of domination and control by the political, economic and religious leaders of the nation. Because he truly knows God and carries out God’s intentions for society, “righteousness shall be the belt around his waist and faithfulness the girdle of his loins”; he will be surrounded and supported by his acts of justice and integrity (cf. Eph. 6:14).

What will be the outcome for a nation that lives under the rule of such a messiah king? What will result from such a single focus and commitment to acting out justice, working for a society of equitable wealth and centering the entire nation in a corporate relationship with God? What will come of such accountable behavior in public life and spiritual centeredness in private life will be the realizing of the Peaceable Kingdom!

Isaiah writes, “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (vss. 6-9). God’s shalom community, the kingdom of God, will come as the result of just and insightful rule in public life by God’s chosen ones!

Then Isaiah ends with the refrain for this magnificent vision. “On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious” (vs. 10). Thus ends the magnificent vision of Isaiah – a vision that demonstrates how God’s kingdom can most certainly be realized in human society when its leaders and people seek God and work for justice throughout their nation.

Psalm 72 seems to be almost a restatement of the Old Testament Lesson for today. This psalm is a prayer for guidance and support for the king. What is intriguing, however, is the author's presuppositions about what should be the focus of the monarch's interests and action.

“(The king) delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no help. He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight” (72:12-14).

And again, “May there be abundance of grain in the land; may it wave on the tops of the mountains; may its fruit be like Lebanon; and may people blossom in the cities like the grass of the field” (vs. 16).

The assumption of the author is that an Israelite monarchy will be measured by the degree to which poverty will be eliminated, oppression of the people lifted and prosperity has spread throughout the land. These are the marks of a successful and effective king. It is the well-being of all the people of his nation with which the king is meant to deal. This is to be his focus – not extending the territory of his reign, victory in warfare, and the building of his personal fortune or power.

Matthew 3:1-12. The theme of the Gospel of Matthew, as noted in the Gospel lesson for the opening Sunday of Advent, is that of Jesus as the Messiah, but as a messiah marginalized by the political, economic and religious powers of Israel, and never embraced by them. Today's Gospel lesson presents the beginning of Jesus' ministry through the person and message of John the Baptist. So it is in that presentation that the marginalization of the Messiah is amply introduced.

The text tells us, “In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near”” (3:1). Suddenly, the text is upon us! Matthew introduces this man who proclaims the coming of Jesus with no introduction at all. We have no idea who John is – who are his parents, from what region of the nation he comes, or even his prior relationship with or knowledge of Jesus. Unlike Luke who tells us a great deal about John the Baptist's origins, parentage and early life before introducing him as the one announcing Jesus' advent among us, Matthew suddenly inserts him into the story. All at once, without any explanation, Matthew introduces this enigmatic character into the text. All we know of him from this text is that John is “the baptizer” (a better translation than “the Baptist”). Why he baptized people becomes clearer later on in this story. Such a sudden appearance and then dismissal of the man is an indication that Matthew does not see John's story as being important in and of itself, but rather his only importance is his announcement of God's action upon Israel and the world in the coming of Israel's Messiah, Jesus.

In his introduction of John, however, Matthew is careful to insert into the story that John – like Jesus after him – is marginalized from the centers of Judea's power. He notes that John “appeared in the wilderness of Judea” in order to both call the nation to repentance and to baptize as a symbolic act of one's repentance. It will be to the wilderness, as well, that Jesus will come in order to be both baptized and credentialed by John to Israel.

Why the wilderness? Why did not John preach in Jerusalem? What is so important about the desert that Matthew feels compelled to weave it into the very fabric of this introductory story? Well, the wilderness is tremendously strategic to the formation and sustenance of Israel's mission given to them by God. The wilderness is, first of all, away from that city that is the center of the "powers" and the domination of the politics, economics and religious practices of the city by the elite who dominated all of Israel and who controlled the nation's power, wealth and values for their own purposes and profit.

But the wilderness was also the venue where God made things happen for the building of God's society of justice, equity of wealth, elimination of poverty and the creation of a relational culture around God – the "kingdom of heaven". It was into the wilderness that Israel had fled from the abuse of Pharaoh and his treasure cities of Rameses and Pithom. It was in the wilderness that God had given to those escaped slaves the Ten Commandments. It was in the wilderness that the Hebrews had received the Law and had been shaped into God's nation. It was out of the wilderness that a disciplined Israel had come to conquer the Promised Land. It was into the wilderness that Elijah, Israel's greatest prophet, had fled to meet with God and to be inspired to defeat a dominating king. It was through the wilderness that a defeated Israel had been marched into Babylonian captivity, and it was in their spiritual wilderness of Babylon that they had been fashioned into those people who would give birth to Judaism.

Not only so, but Matthew will use the theme of wilderness to describe Jesus' ministry as the marginalized Messiah. It will be into the wilderness that Jesus would be "led by the Spirit to be tempted by the devil" and consider non-Godly alternative for building "the kingdom of heaven". It will be at the margins of Israel's life – both physically and spiritually – that Jesus will be forced to work as he teaches about that kingdom, builds a people living out the kingdom and begins his march toward Jerusalem (the center of the principalities and powers against whom Jesus wars) that will eventuate in his apparent defeat and his ultimate victory (crucifixion and resurrection). In fact, the Greek word *anachorein* ("to withdraw") will be used over and over again in Matthew's Gospel to remind the reader of the integral play between Jesus' confrontative mission to those who seek to build their own kingdom and his retreat to "wildernesses" for the building and sustenance of his loyal followers.

John's message is both simple and clear. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near"! Intriguingly, John's message is, word-for-word, the invitation that Jesus will later issue to all (Matthew 4:17), thus stressing the continuity between the two of them. The English translation "come near" doesn't capture the urgency of the original Greek; it is better translated "The kingdom of heaven is fast approaching"! Action is required on our part, John is saying, because God is right now commencing to start to begin to act! And when God begins acting, God can't be stopped!

God is activating that which the prophets have proclaimed and anticipated for centuries, that Moses formulated and worked faithfully to create, and that Israelite judges, priests, prophets, kings and leaders had single-mindedly sought – the kingdom of heaven, the shalom community, God's political, economic and spiritual empire activated in our very midst! That fast approaching of God's kingdom requires of all people not only their embrace of that kingdom of justice, equity and relationality, but also their turning from a former way of life that was centered

on domination, greed and control. The task of each person and of society as a whole must be the twin acts of repenting of former priorities and commitments, as well as that of embracing God's new way of life. So act now! Repent! And embrace God's intentions for us all and for our society.

After presenting John's message that is a foretaste of the message and mission of Jesus, Matthew immediately returns to the theme of wilderness and consequent marginalization. "This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'.'" Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey" (vss. 3-4).

Matthew, who alone quotes more Old Testament passages than the other gospels combined in his effort to demonstrate that Jesus is the marginalized messiah, here quotes Isaiah 40:3. This passage is a particularly pregnant passage for Matthew to select to demonstrate that John is acting as one from "the wilderness" that calls upon the powerful to repent. Isaiah 40 tells of how God has acted to save Israel from two tyrants – from Pharaoh through the people's exodus from Egypt and from Babylonian dictators through the new "exodus" the captive Israelites were to experience under the Persian Cyrus as he freed the Jewish exiles from this new slavery. Matthew intentionally uses this scripture that rehearses two liberations in order to announce a third deliverance – the liberation that would come to the Jewish people and to all humanity through Jesus' ultimate triumph over Jewish priestly and economic exploitation, Roman dominance and the control of all "principalities and powers".

But such liberation would come from the margins of life. For like Jesus, John was not a child of the elite, but rather of peasants. He is one who is living an ascetic lifestyle, wearing the rough "clothing of camel's hair" and eating a diet of the very poor which can be scrounged from nature: "locusts and honey". He is in direct contrast to the wealth and power of the elite. In his lifestyle and appearance, in his opposition to the elite (e.g., 3:7-10) and in his single-minded focus upon the coming of God's Kingdom, John is like a reincarnated Elijah (II Kings 1:8) who confronted King Ahab, championed the poor and the peasant, and brought about the overthrow of kings and tyrants in the re-establishment of God's kingdom in Israel.

So how did the people respond to this new Elijah sounding a new call to that elusive "kingdom of heaven" after which the Israelite faithful had longed for centuries? "Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins" (vss. 5-6).

John understands the importance of the symbolic. He calls upon the Israelite people to repent of the ways they have allowed themselves to be seduced or intimidated politically, economically, socially and spiritually by "the powers that be". He offers to them a vision of the world as God intended it to be, so that they might refocus their lives on seeking after such transformation. But he also provides an action in which the people participate to symbolize both to themselves and to others their rejection of the world of domination and exploitation and their embrace of God's kingdom of justice, equity and shalom. And that action is to participate in the ritual of baptism.

Baptism was practiced by the Essene community of John's day as a way that devotees could symbolize to themselves and each other their continued commitment to the lifestyle of that community that withdrew them from the dominant lifestyle of the world and into their commune. All Jews knew of the Essenes and their unique lifestyle. John, in essence, takes this ritual and alters it for use in his call to the people to embrace the Kingdom of Heaven. He does so, however, not by calling upon them to withdraw from the world, but to re-embrace the world in a new way – a way that places emphasis upon reclaiming God's intentions for their city, nation and world while eschewing the temptations to imitate those in power by lusting for wealth, power and position while oppressing, exploiting and dominating others. Thus, John's baptism provides for the people a way that they can act their way into a whole new way of thinking – and thus a whole new way of living and understanding life lived within the reign of God!

But Matthew is not finished with John the baptizer yet. He wants to be sure that the reader is left with no doubt at all about the intent, focus and thrust of John's proclamation. So Matthew ends this section on John with a startling summary of his words: "But when John saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (vss. 7-10).

It is intriguing that in this passage, Matthew states that the Pharisees and Sadducees are "coming for baptism". That is, they are not standing aside in criticism and rejection of John's ministry and message, as we often envision them doing. Nor are they absent from the scene, as suggested by the Gospels of Mark and Luke. Rather, they are present and are desirous of participating in the symbolic exercise of indicating repentance of living under the dominance of the systems and, by their baptism, pledging themselves to truly seek to build the kingdom of heaven. Yet, John will not allow them to participate in that symbolic act. He halts them and calls them to accountability. As both representatives of Israel's political, economic and religious systems and as beneficiaries of its oppression and exploitation of the people, the Pharisees and Sadducees are exposed for not bearing "fruit worthy of repentance". There is nothing in the priorities or actions of their lives that indicate they truly want to embrace any other life style than that which has made them wealthy and powerful. They depend upon their belief that their physical descent from Abraham somehow makes them worthy of God's blessings, but refuse to recognize that it is the priorities by which they live and the actions they take toward the poor, marginalized and powerless that betray them for the hypocrites that they are. For them and for the systems they represent, "the ax is lying at the root of the trees" and they will be felled by God's intervention "and thrown into the fire".

John then concludes, "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (vss. 11-12).

John's message ends with his announcement that God is about to act by presenting before Israel "one who is more powerful than I (and who) I am not worthy to carry his sandals". This is the messianic king of Israel, the chosen one of God, the Messiah. He will come from the margins to act in a cleansing way for all Israel. If John baptized for repentance, the Messiah will "baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire", so that the people will be both liberated and saved from the oppression of the powers that be ("the Holy Spirit") and yet will also be judged for their willingness to be seduced by these same powers ("fire"). The coming of the Messiah will be like the sweeping of a new broom as Israel will be swept clear of all the chaff and detritus of their former existence, and will embrace the kingdom of heaven in their midst that John has so faithfully proclaimed is "fast approaching"!

Romans 15:4-13 is a fitting conclusion to the thrust of the lectionary for the Second Sunday of Advent. Paul begins by reminding the Christians in Rome that the gospel didn't begin with them or with the Gentiles or even with Paul. It did not originally begin even with the man Jesus. It began with Israel, and it began with the patriarchs, the leaders and the prophets of old. All that they did and said, the ways God revealed God's self through them, and their writings all occurred "for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope" (vs. 4). We who are Christians today, Paul reminds the Romans, stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us and who sought to be faithful to the revelation of grace (however incomplete it might have been) that God gave to them. We would not be where we are today if it had not been for them!

Paul then develops his argument in the most profound way. "May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another", Paul writes, "in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (vss. 5-6). The harmony we Christians have both with one another and with the saints who have gone before us is a harmony, Paul declares, that has been given by God. The Greek word that Paul uses that is translated "together" ("so that together you may with one voice glorify God"), the word *homothymadon* means a unity that comes about, not because of a common condition that we happen to have together (such as national citizenship or having gone to the same college or even because we happen to be brother and sister Christians), but rather is a unity that comes from an outside source (in this case, God). That is, Paul is not calling upon Christians to *act* unified because of a common human denominator, but rather to simply *accept* and *embrace* a unity that they are already given by God simply because of the graciousness and love that God has for them.

What Paul is declaring here is profoundly similar to what the writer of the Deuteronomic Law meant when he wrote, "It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you – for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the Lord loved you that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery" (Deut. 7:7-8). "Why does God love you?" the Deuteronomist asks. "He doesn't love you because you are deserving of that love. He loves you simply because he chooses to love you!" So why are we Christians unified into one body? It is not because we deserve it, but because God simply chooses to love us this way! So act like you're a chosen people!

Paul continues this theme in this passage. “Welcome one another, therefore,” he writes, “just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (vs. 7). Again, Paul’s argument is strengthened by the very words he chooses to use. The word he uses that is translated “welcome” (*paralambano*) has the sense of accepting another because of the acceptance you have already received. In this case, of course, Paul’s use of the word is stating that we should accept each other in the faith because we are already accepted by Christ. The faith we hold in common, we hold in common because it has been free gift to every one of us through Christ. Therefore, because each of us has been embraced by Christ (even though we didn’t deserve it), we are to accept and embrace each other. So Paul is not suggesting that we “welcome” each other as we might welcome visitors to our church on a Sunday morning (a “hail-fellow-well-met”), but rather are to embrace and accept each other because we have been affirmed and embraced by God in Christ.

That embrace must be not only for our contemporaries but must include all who have gone before us. And that includes, among the people of faith, all the “saints” of Israel who preceded the birth of Jesus Christ. “For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised (that is, the Jews) on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy” (vss. 8-9a). That is, Paul is reminding the Roman Christians that it is only lately that the mercy and grace of God has been extended to the Gentiles. The first to receive God’s grace were the Jews, from the patriarch Abraham to the present day; God’s “truth” and “mercy” was first extended to them. It has only been since the coming of Jesus Christ that God’s mercy has been extended to the Gentiles who embrace him. Therefore, Paul is saying, you Gentile Christians need to embrace all who have been children of Abraham for all of us have been children of the covenant!

To back up his claim, Paul then extensively quotes from the Hebrew Bible. He refers to Psalm 18:49, II Sam. 22:50, Deut. 32:43, Psalm 117:1 and Isaiah 11:10 to support his argument that the Gentiles have been *included* (added) in God’s plan of salvation, not *substituted* for the Jews. Having made this argument, he then concludes this passage by giving a blessing to them as they embrace this much larger perspective of God’s grace than what they were wont to hold.

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