

December 4, 2016 The Root of Jesse Homily: Dear brothers and sisters, the words of today's first reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah (Is.11:1-9) have become unforgettable to all English speaking peoples because of George Frederic Handel's use of them in the world's best loved oratorio, "*Messiah*."

For good reason is Handel's masterwork often heard in the Advent and Christmas seasons. In part one of the musical composition, the composer draws heavily from the prophecies of the Messiah in the Old Testament, especially in Isaiah, where they are so numerous. Many of the Church Fathers considered the Book of the Prophet Isaiah to be the "fifth gospel". One can easily find Christ in Isaiah! So whenever we hear the inspired words of the prophet, "On that day, a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse, and from his roots a bud shall blossom" (Is.11:1), we hear Handel's music. And the expected consequence? Our Spirits are raised, our minds illuminated and our faith in Jesus bolstered. As Peter Kreeft, Professor of Philosophy at Boston College writes in his book, "You can understand the Old Testament", "It doesn't take an effort to join these texts and the music; it takes an effort to separate them now. I expect to hear them in heaven."

In 1960, the City of Rome hosted the summer Olympic Games. Most of the participating athletes were born during the tumultuous period of the Second World War. Fifteen years after the war ended, the reigning Pontiff of the time, Pope John XXIII, conceived a brilliant plan, which he soon implemented. He issued to all the athletes a commemorative medallion, depicting the image of a seemingly lifeless stump from which a fresh new sprig is sprouting. (A clear reference to Isaiah 11:1.) It is an image of hope... a ringing affirmation of youthful idealism and a promise of a brighter future. In the aftermath of a bloody war in which millions perished, the Pope turned to the Prophet Isaiah for inspiration. He blessed the athletes with hope in his heart for the future of the human race.

Oftentimes, in reflecting on the prophets of old we are likely to imagine some bleak scenario. We see the prophet as a messenger of doom and gloom. But such is not always the case. In today's Old Testament reading, devout Jews came to look to a more distant future for the advent of a ruler in whose reign "the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb and the leopard shall lie down with the kid". (Is.11:6)

In his reflection on Isaiah's prophecy, Pope Francis remarks, "Isaiah tells us what the days of the Messiah will be like... they will be days of peace". The prophet says, "On that day, the root of Jesse, set up as a signal for the nations, the Gentiles shall seek out, for his dwelling will be glorious". (Is.11:10) He added that "Jesus (the root of Jesse) will bring peace between us and God and peace between each other".

So the peace we all long for is that brought by the Redeemer. He hopes that the peace of the Messiah will find a dwelling in each one of us! May his earnest prayer be answered by us, disciples of the Prince of Peace.

Amen!