

The elections last month brought out a record number of voters. But with mudslinging at every level – local and national – many of us said we lacked candidates we could vote for enthusiastically. They all had shortcomings. It was hard to find just the one who stood for all the things we believed in.

The people of Israel knew the same feeling during the time of Isaiah. Their leaders had flaws. In today's prophecy, Isaiah foresees a great ruler over the people. He says the Lord will give that ruler a spirit of wisdom, understanding, counsel, strength, knowledge and fear of the Lord. Apparently, those were the traits that their own ruler lacked.

Christians believe those traits all became manifest in Jesus, who came to rule the world with justice and faithfulness. This same list of traits appears in Catholic tradition as the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the sacrament of confirmation. In confirmation, we receive wisdom, understanding, counsel, strength, knowledge and fear of the Lord. Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled in different ways. It was fulfilled most perfectly with the coming of Jesus, but it also gets fulfilled anytime one of us is confirmed. We receive the very gifts that Isaiah's people longed for in a good ruler. We become the royal people of God, called to take leadership in the land.

Sometimes we do not exercise these gifts. We don't always have the judgment to say the right words in times of conflict, or to do the right thing when we are tempted to sin. We're not always sure when to say no to a child. We don't even know whether to stay home from work when we get sick or not take the car out when snow is falling. We have the gifts of the Spirit, but we need God's help to use them.

Isaiah offers a simple test to tell when God's gifts are used well. He says it will benefit the poor. This new ruler will judge the poor with justice and decide aright for the land's afflicted. If you use the gifts of the Spirit, you won't be selfish; the poor and the afflicted will be treated fairly.

We do not always do this. We sometimes look on the poor and afflicted as a bother, a blemish on society, and a drain on our resources. But often the poor are doing all they can. They work hard but earn little. They are squeezed by increased costs, family demands and ill health. They need assistance, not prejudice. Isaiah says the ideal ruler shall not judge by appearance nor decide by hearsay. But often we who have the gifts of the Spirit judge people by their appearance or make decisions by hearsay, rather than do the hard work of listening, learning and helping.

Our Christmas preparations each year include cards, decorations and gifts. They also include care for the poor. And not just the material things they need, but a shoulder to cry on and ears that listen to their woes. It's easy to say there isn't one political candidate who stands for my ideals, but it's harder to accuse ourselves and admit we don't always stand for our ideals either. Still, God's Spirit is here, working within us, ready to help us this Christmas bring good news to the poor.