

1st Sunday of Advent (C)

28th November 2021

‘Longing & hoping: Old Testament, Isaiah & Year C’

Jer 33: *a virtuous branch grow for David*

1Thess 3–4: *be blameless in the sight of our God and Father when Jesus comes ...*

Lk 21: 25–28, 34–36: *stand erect, hold your heads high, your liberation is near ...*

Is Advent, I wonder, the season that can — and often does — ‘get lost’? I rather think that it is. I find the season of Advent a most gentle, beautiful one, and its liturgical celebrations some of the loveliest ... the **Scripture** of Advent; its being a **preparation** season (hence the purple) but not with the starkness or penance of Lent; the awesome music and readings of **carol services** as we get nearer to Christmas; the **longing and hoping**, inherent in the season, as we insert ourselves into the long history of God’s people who have waited, hoped, and longed for Him to come. It’s a beautiful season, rich in its liturgy and simple in its appeal, and yet ... so often we can lose it, lose this moving season of preparation and allow ourselves to be swamped already with Christmas.

Understandably at university, we seem barely to be beyond Hallowe’en, Guy Fawkes Night and Remembrance Sunday, than we are gearing up for the end of term, those

final essays and assignments, and it’s a few parties and we’re off. So, here particularly, it can seem all too understandable that we lose Advent, and it passes us by ... our minds already set on Christmas. But ... as Christians I really believe that we can salvage and hold on to something of Advent, and keep it well, despite the distractions, truly distinct from Christmas. I’d like to start with a reflection on the *Scripture* of Advent.

So: today we begin today a new Church year (‘year C’); this is the year in which we will hear mostly St Luke’s Gospel on Sundays. Luke’s is a beautiful and distinctive Gospel, and while the majority of his material is shared with Matthew & Mark, there are large parts of his Gospel that are unique, and with unique emphases. Just mentioning a few, quickly ... (i) Luke was a **non-Jew**, a well-educated doctor, with the **best written Greek** in the NT; (ii) his is the **longest Gospel**, and along with *Acts* which is the sequel to his Gospel he wrote a quarter of the NT; (iii) he has **unique takes on Mary** (think of the Annunciation, the Infancy Narratives, the Gospel canticles

etc.), the presence and role of **women**, the **poor and marginalized**, and the **mercy of God**; (iv) his is the only Gospel with each of **these famous parables**: the Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan, the Pharisee & the Publican, the Rich Man & Lazarus; (v) and who can forget that immortalized scene ‘on the **road to Emmaus**’? — also only in Luke. We have, therefore, a wonderful year ahead with Luke; Year C stretches before us for our nourishment in the Gospel of Jesus as given us by St Luke, beginning today. He will help us truly to “*stay awake, praying at all times, for the strength to survive all that is going to happen, and to stand with confidence before the Son of Man.*”

But I want to say a bit more, today, about the 1st readings, and to look forward to the principal author of our Advent Scripture, the primary prophet of Advent, namely **Isaiah**. As you know, the 1st Reading is almost always drawn from the Old Testament (except in Eastertide, when instead we hear from the *Acts of the Apostles*). Now, the OT is a vast and complex series of works, not by one

author, but by many, and written and edited together over a huge long period from about 1200 years BC right up to the century before Christ. Mostly written originally in Hebrew, though some parts in Greek, the Old Testament books consist of 3 major types of writing, and this is the order in which they are usually published: History (21 bks, starting with the Torah (Gen. to Deut.) and going through Israel’s history to the books of the Maccabees); Wisdom literature (7 bks, including Job, Psalms and Proverbs); and then the Prophets (18 bks, including long works such as Isaiah and Jeremiah, and some very short works, too, such as the 12 minor prophets).

We only read a small fraction of the Old Testament over the course of the 3-year cycle of Sundays — perhaps about 4% (14% if you add in the readings for weekday Masses) — but still, the selection of OT readings we get to hear at Mass is a rich and varied selection from the vast treasure of the Jewish Scriptures. The OT Readings at Mass generally follow no pattern other than being chosen to shed light on the Gospel reading to come. They show

how what is fulfilled in Christ is prepared for by God in His revelation to mankind in former times, most especially in the history and the faith of the peoples of Israel.

Nowhere is that clearer than in all the prophecies that we will be hearing in this holy season of Advent. Most of the OT readings in the days of Advent are from the 1st part of the prophet Isaiah, whose words on the coming of the Messiah are so powerful and touching, even though he wrote some 8 centuries before Christ. He truly is *the* prophet of Advent. His is the outpouring of teaching concerning the Messiah to come; in fact the set of chapters, 7–12, is often known as the ‘Book of Emmanuel,’ and the prophet Isaiah’s writings, colloquially are known as the ‘5th Gospel,’ so important is this book of the OT to us as Christians. Listen out keenly, then, through Advent, for this prophetic voice of Isaiah, announcing, all that time before Christ, the one who was to come, and painting such a picture of the (suffering) glory of the Messiah; no wonder Israel did live in such fervent hope, and through the intervening 8 centuries longed for the day of His coming!

But, having said all that about Isaiah, it happens that for the 4 Sundays of Advent / Year C, we actually get the words of other prophets, who like Isaiah lived similarly long ago: Jeremiah, Baruch, Zephaniah and Micah. Today’s words from **Jeremiah** sum up just why we owe such a lot to those prophecies of old. We see why we should have Advent hope in Jesus’s coming, when we think how those faithful Jewish believers longed for God to act, and then He did:

¹⁴ “Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfil the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ¹⁵ In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring forth for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.”

We can only interpret the OT in the light of the NT, the light of Christ, for all of Scripture ultimately speaks of Jesus, “the one who was to come” and then *did* come. Without all that backup of the OT, we don’t see the beauty of God’s complete plan, and our Christian faith is cut adrift from its Jewish roots.

So let’s listen attentively this Advent to the promises God gave to our ancestors of old, and which He fulfilled in

the coming of our Saviour Jesus Christ. Let's long to feel that blessing of ancient fulfilment, which gives us such hope and peace for today and for the future: not 'airy-fairy hope' that vanishes into thin air; but solid Christian hope, hope in God, hope that sees His actions in history and trusts in His acting for us.

So, in the first instance, as term draws into its last weeks, and Advent is upon us, I recommend your making extra efforts to come to **weekday Mass** — 5.30pm here Monday to Friday (11.30am Saturday) — and this'll continue right up to Christmas. And I also highly commend to you the lovely **book of personal reflections**, based on Scripture and on the prayers of the Advent & Christmas liturgy, that Chris has prepared for you for today. As a bare minimum, as a little extra for Advent, please use these booklets — let's see them well-thumbed by the time you come back after Christmas!

There's no better accompaniment for our Advent days than the Word of God — in Mass and in these printed reflections: the words of the inspired prophets, the words

of the Word made flesh — as we look to immerse ourselves in the hope that has always been the hallmark of the people of God ... *“as we await the blessed hope and the coming of our Saviour Jesus Christ.”*