

2nd Sunday of Advent (C)

5th December 2021

'The Sacrament of Homecoming'

Bar 5: recovery of Jerusalem's glory after the exile Ps 125: *when the Lord delivered Zion from bondage ...* Phil 1: *Be pure and blameless for the day of Christ*
Lk 3:1-6: *the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah*

Working as I did, some years ago, as a hospital chaplain at Barts & the London in the East End for 5½ yrs, I had a whole spectrum of experiences: some very sad, obviously, but others very moving and happy. One of the particular joys was to see someone who had been extremely ill and who'd been in hospital for weeks finally getting ready to go home. I'm sure that you, too, many of you, are looking forward, even after a good term here at university / Newman House, to going home, seeing your family, your family home, your familiar surroundings.

If often takes a while away from home to realise how much one wants to be back. One can even have a great holiday, but the disruption of being away also gives coming home its pleasures. Much of Scripture has to do with homecoming — such as today's first reading. We don't often get readings from the prophet Baruch, as it's not a very long book, just 6 chapters / 7 pages! Baruch

was a contemporary and companion of the prophet Jeremiah, perhaps his scribe too. Along with Jeremiah, he experienced the awful tragedy of the exile, a 50-year period in the 6thc. BC when some 5000 of the ruling and professional classes were deported from Jerusalem to Babylon, or later fled to Egypt. It was a catastrophe for the Hebrew people, because they had been so certain of their covenant with God who had led them into the Promised Land some 400 years earlier. And yet some of the finest writings in the Old Testament come from that experience of having been taken away from the homeland. There in Babylon they longed to be back in Jerusalem, back in God's Holy City and in His temple. Our reading from the prophet Baruch predicts the homecoming, the joy which will accompany the return to God's house. [The psalm echoes this same rejoicing: "when the Lord delivered Zion from bondage, it seemed like a dream."] Like so many other Israelite prophets of those times, Baruch knows that God will restore His people after the sorrowful and salutary experience of the exile; God will not abandon

them, but bring them back to Himself with renewed hearts.

We reflected last Sunday about this prophetic tradition of Advent — the promises uttered by Israel's great figures, that find their fulfilment in and only in Jesus. As well as Baruch, we have another powerful prophet coming to us in the Scripture of this 2nd Sunday of Advent, another 'OT' prophet ... John the Baptist. I say, 'Old Testament prophet,' and yet, of course, he is in the New Testament! But, in fact, John the Baptist is precisely that prophet who straddles the divide between 'Old' and 'New.' He is the 'hinge' on which the two testaments turn: the last of the OT prophets and the first of the NT saints. Accompanying Luke's Gospel commencement of John's ministry is — no surprises! — a text from Isaiah: prophet announcing prophet!

This second Sunday of Advent every year is an occasion when we look to the message of John the Baptist as he appeared in that prophetic mould as forerunner of the Messiah. He fulfils the prophecy of Isaiah, coming as one to 'prepare the way of the Lord.' And in this we find again

a message of the 'joy of homecoming' that we heard earlier from Baruch. What links John to the joy of a return home is his essential message: "repentance for the forgiveness of sins." What could be more like a return to God's house than seeking reconciliation with God when we acknowledge our sins?

Just as John the Baptist called for repentance in preparation for the coming of the Messiah, so we should be preparing our hearts this Advent for Christ's coming at Christmas. And amongst other this means Confession — the Sacrament of Reconciliation — the 'sacrament of homecoming.' What were we saying about returning home? That it was a joy, a welcome thing. So it is when we come to this sacrament to have the weight and sadness of sins lifted from our hearts. What a relief it is when we confess our sins and receive the grace of forgiveness guaranteed by God in this sacrament; a grace also to begin again, to try again to live more as He would want. Nothing could be more joyful this Advent than to come (home) to Christmas with a pure heart.

The Church insists that as a minimum we should receive the sacrament to confess grave sins at least once a year, but it's good practice, attested by so many of the saints, to confess one's sins far more often than that. I'm sure you find that the longer you leave going, the harder it is to come back, ... but any time is a good time and Advent is a *very* good time. Don't worry about anything with regard to Confession; concern yourself only with what will be 'the joy of homecoming'!

- (i) Don't worry if you've forgotten the words — the priest will happily help you through.
- (ii) Don't worry if you aren't clear what's right and wrong, he'll discuss with you whatever you need to.
- (iii) Don't worry if you can't make the times advertised — I will always make time for someone to receive this sacrament, as many of you well know (if I'm not free the moment you ask me, I will agree another time with you).
- (iv) Don't worry if you don't want to go to confession to me ... Fr Ivano also offers the chance for Confession regularly on Mondays after Mass, 6–7pm too.)

Additionally, as well as my usual time of Sunday 6–7pm, I

intend to offer Confessions this coming Friday (10th) after evening Mass (6–7pm) as well, as an extra opportunity. Also note: outside, in the porch to the chapel, there are a variety of [leaflets for preparing for confession](#). The student who's assisting on the door with the Mass sheets and newsletters will also be able to guide you to such a leaflet if you would like one.

Above all, don't be anxious about coming (back) to confession. God's forgiveness and mercy are boundless, but how can He forgive us if we don't bring ourselves to ask for it? Be no more afraid than you'd be afraid to come home, with all the joy that brings. God is merciful, and even if you have been away from Confession a long time, he opens the door to you with a smile, with a genuine 'welcome home'! He wants you to be 'at home' with Him, with no secrets, guilt, or barriers. May St John the Baptist with his prophetic call urge us all to seek reconciliation in Confession in this Advent season: "*Prepare the way for the Lord, make His paths straight ... And all mankind shall see the salvation of God.*"