

2nd Sunday of Advent (A)

4th December 2022

‘Prepare the way for the Lord!’

Is 11: a shoot springs from the stock of Jesse shall flourish ... Rom 15: *the examples ... of how people who did not give up were helped by God* Mt 3: 1–12: *in due course John the Baptist appeared ...* Ps 71: in His days justice

I am always taken with those words of St Paul in the 2nd reading: *Everything that was written long ago in the Scriptures was meant to teach us something about hope from the examples Scripture gives of how people who did not give up were helped by God.* “Something about hope” — this is the point of our Advent ... it’s the very season of hope: hope, longing and expectation. Israel had to wait patiently for the Messiah, but He did come; we have to await the end of the world, the Second Coming, and we must do so patiently, keeping faith; but we know He will come again. Advent is about trying to experience this deep and real hope, the hope of Jesus’s coming.

“Something about hope” — this is why we’ve all these Advent readings from Isaiah. Isaiah is the key prophet of waiting, and of Advent: every first reading on the Advent Sundays, and most of the weekdays in these first two weeks of Advent, and the first readings at

Christmas. Isaiah’s key message is that of the Messiah, the One who was to come — the great hope of the people of Israel. Today’s first reading talks of Him as *a shoot spring[ing] from the stock of Jesse*. The ‘stock of Jesse’ means the line of King David, since Jesse was the father of David. Even by Isaiah’s day the glory of the years of King David (250 years before) had rather faded. But God revealed through Isaiah that from the stump, from what remained of David’s house and line, would eventually arise one anointed with the Spirit of the Lord — a leader who would administer perfect justice and initiate a reign of lasting peace. This is the promised Messiah — the ultimate hope of those who did not give up. No wonder it is Isaiah’s great hope that we hear of as we prepare for Christ’s coming at Christmas.

We also hear Isaiah quoted in the Gospel this week. In beginning Advent last Sunday, we have begun ‘year A’ — the year in which we hear on Sundays predominantly the Gospel according to St Matthew. It is believed that Matthew wrote his Gospel account primarily for Christians

of a Jewish origin. And he often makes references to the Old Testament in order to show to his Jewish readers that in all things Christ's coming fulfils the prophecies in Scripture. So, Matthew says, "*the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Prepare a way for the Lord'*," is in fact St John the Baptist. Isaiah's prophecy of long ago fulfilled as John comes preaching a baptism of repentance.

In fact, an important part about *recovering hope* is in having the burden of our sins lifted. If we are weighed down by our sins, having hope alive in our heart is harder: we feel spiritually sluggish, we are prone to worry less about sinning further, we feel less like praying and being charitable. Hope comes alive when we know that we are forgiven what we have done wrong, and when our hearts are cleansed and refreshed for the coming of the Saviour. This is why we hear the call of St John the Baptist, not once but twice, on *both* of the middle Sundays of Advent, calling us to "prepare the way for the Lord."

This 2nd Sunday of Advent, therefore, is always a Sunday which is somewhat penitential — we are to prepare

our hearts for the coming of Jesus, just as John announced. Advent has a different feel to that of Lent, however. In Lent we are doing penance, fasting and giving to charity, turning away from our sins as we accompany Jesus on His journey to Jerusalem and the Cross. Advent is different. In Advent we wear purple too, but not so much to show penance as to show expectation and hope. Each is a season of preparation, but in Advent we are preparing for Christ's birth, rather than His death. We prepare for a birth, and we prepare for a death, but in very different ways. Each requires us to get our house in order — each requires us to make changes in our lives. One is to prepare to receive the innocent and holy child into our life; the other is to take a share in His suffering and death. Very different moods, and yet each require, for different motives, a clean heart.

John the Baptist's message, in a nutshell, is identical to that of Jesus when later He comes. What we hear John say here — "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is close at hand" — is the very same as Jesus preaches as He begins His ministry (1 ch. later, in Mt4). John is such a towering

figure: the last of the OT prophets, the first of the NT saints. Imagine going out to the banks of the River Jordan to hear him — a rather scary figure, awesome-looking, a prophet and saint! Yet we *must* listen to him as he appeals to us to be ready for the coming of Jesus. In effect, as John appears, so the message of the Gospel has already begun: he isn't just announcing that the Messiah is on His way; he is already initiating Jesus's message of repentance. John's message is already the Christian message; in John, history has already turned the corner: God's long-awaited plan is now unfolding!

So, we cannot avoid the fact that Advent — Jesus's imminent "coming" — invites us strongly to repentance. Three times we hear those words in the Gospel passage today: "*Repent* for the Kingdom of Heaven is close at hand" ... "Bear fruit worthy of *repentance*" ... "I baptize you with water for *repentance*." To get our hearts ready to welcome the new-born Christ at Christmas means having them cleansed of sin: warm and welcoming, filled with grace and love; not cold and half-hearted. If we are not to

miss the whole point of Christmas, Jesus's wonderful birth in the world, then we must make clean our hearts.

The Second Sunday of Advent, and John the Baptist's preaching, provides us with just this chance to commit to making clean our hearts. If we are to hold the infant God in our hearts in just a couple of weeks' time, what should we be thinking about changing? If John the Baptist were standing here this morning in his camel-hair and leather belt, what would he be urging us to, as we await Christ's coming? Would he be saying, "Oh, don't worry about it, let it happen — He won't care how He finds you." No, I don't think so! He'd be saying, "Look deep in your hearts, look over your life in prayer — are there things that need changing? Are there things that need repenting of before the Lord comes?" We must therefore take the opportunity, this season, to get to confession, somehow, somewhere. To bring to Christ's healing forgiveness the failures in our loving God and our neighbour. All the things we'd be embarrassed of in the face of the loving child of Bethlehem, our holy Saviour.

All the things which we'd so want to be cleansed of before celebrating Christmas. So, especially if you haven't been for a long time, please "prepare a way for the Lord" in the Sacrament of Reconciliation! There's no other way to be truly ready for His coming at Christmas than with a heart clean of sin. And there's no more beautiful and sure way to be released from our sins, especially if they are grave sins than to go to Confession. So, even if it's been some time (years?) since Confession, make a special date with the Lord. We are in a position to give a *great gift* to the Lord this Christmas — the gift of a humble, contrite heart, a life examined in the light of God's example of love. But, in fact, *the far greater gift* is that which we receive from Him: His forgiveness, the relief of a soul unburdened from guilt and sin.

So, this is how we recover hope — true, lasting, Christian hope. Only our Lord Jesus can give this gift of undying hope, and He gives it mercifully, and in abundance, if we approach in faith and with repentance. So, don't let the chance of Reconciliation slip off the

bottom of the Christmas shopping list. Don't put it off and off, claiming to be too busy to say sorry to God for your sins. Make sure that you have a date for Confession clearly in your minds; and make a prayer of commitment now, to be there some day between now and Christmas.

Jesus, Lord, I need Your mercy;

I want to give you the gift of a clean heart this Christmas;

don't let me find excuses to avoid You;

help me to be humble enough to seek Your gentle forgiveness this Advent.