

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent (C)

1<sup>st</sup> December 2024

'From Black Friday to the Light of Christmas'

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 ...*

We had 'Black Friday' the other day ... both in the American sense of big discounts on shopping that we have sort-of inherited from the USA for the day after their 'Thanksgiving,' but also, more grimly, in the sense that on Friday our MPs in Parliament took a bleak and terrible step in voting to progress a Bill that will allow state-sanctioned taking of life in assisted suicide. Now, there remain opportunities for this Bill to be defeated, yes, but the fact that a majority of the House of Commons was willing to vote to promote suicide at all is a dreadful thing: utilitarian, unprincipled, and definitely not 'compassionate' as it is often marketed as. I stood for 1.5 hrs in the chilly sunshine at the rally outside Parliament on Friday — and some NH students came too — and we did so in the company of many disabled and wheelchair-bound people, whose health is often precarious and who know all too well the necessity of having that absolute, legal, guarantee that

no-one has the right to do them harm, suggest to them, or coerce them into, ending their lives. Instead, now, MPs want our hard-pressed and valiant NHS Drs to compromise their caring profession with the doling-out of poisonous substances, lethal medications that will end someone's life. The very nature of the thing flies in the face of what we believe medicine is actually for, quite apart from the fact that the sacred, spiritual life of every human being is God-given, not disposable, even of those who are admittedly very scared of suffering. Solutions that are loving, and not lethal, are called for, of which there are many. There is no 'right to die' as I wish; there is no 'right to do with my body what I want'; there is no overriding selfish autonomy that says that I can and should kill myself if I so wish.

In an excellent and moving documentary programme called '[Better Off Dead?](#)' by Liz Carr, the disabled British actress, she interviews a young Canadian lady whose mother chose, along with her boyfriend, to request the drugs to kill herself after mental-health complications arising from an accident and concussion; the daughters of

that mother tried legal routes to prevent this, but were powerless, and were, understandably, devastated, when simply told by text that their mother was now dead. What a mess this legislation will create, if eventually passed, and what a moral minefield. There is *only one safe option*, and that's not to allow state-sponsored suicide, of course. And to seek the *truly compassionate answer* to the pain of long-term illness, which is good medical care: hospices, palliative medicine, and even more important than either of those, the presence of loving relatives and friends who are frequently present, sharing the person's life and difficulties, and advocating for his/her medical care in a concerted way. Let's remember: just as much as '*Thou Shalt not Kill*' is a mandatory Judaeo-Christian commandment from God, so too is the injunction to complete that corporal work of mercy, '*Visit the Sick.*'

What has any of this to do with *Advent, the great season of hope* that we have begun today? Well, if this 'Black Friday' leaves us reeling a bit, and feeling hopeless, Advent comes to our rescue, the reminder that there is

always hope: the Christian life is never, ever, hopeless, even in the most desperate of situations. Emily Milne from the [\*Alliance of Pro-Life Students\*](#), who came here to speak the other day, reminded us that Victor Frankl, when interned in Auschwitz noticed that the ones who were able to cope better with the appalling suffering and inhumane conditions in the concentration camp — the attempted dehumanization of the internees — were those who had a deep, interior conviction that their inner self was *not* worthless, as their captors claimed, but that in reality, they had a value that was infinite and untouchable. Just so, in a fully Christian vein, when we are faced with difficulties, disappointments, or even a devastating deterioration in our physical health, we are able to draw on the infinite wells of hope that faith provides, for God is the source of that hope, He is infinite in His power and mercy.

This might be a good starting point for *Advent*, this vision of a passage of hope from darkness to Light; from the horror and emptiness and self-reliance of 'Black Friday' to the light and joy, and dependence on Jesus, of

Christmas Day. The Gospel of this First Sunday of Advent (Year' C,' Year of Luke) is from Lk 21, the very same chapter that we have just been hearing from on the weekdays of the last week of the Church's year. It paints a deeply anxiety-ridden picture of "*the earth[ly] distress of nations in perplexity, ... people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world.*" Into this angst comes riding on the clouds of heaven the divine Son of Man, long-ago-promised to Israel, and now indeed come — once, in poverty and simplicity, in Bethlehem, Galilee, Jerusalem; and once again, yet to come, in the glory of the Second Coming and Last Judgment. Both comings fill us with hope, as they fill out our little lives and take us 'out of ourselves,' countering the worries and fears, and providing a real anchor of meaning.

A key to accessing Advent hope, I think, is a reflection on *prophecy*. The Old-Testament prophets play a great role in the Scripture of Advent: mostly Isaiah, whose passages of immense beauty populate our Advent liturgies a great deal; but on these Advent Sundays of Year

'C' prophets other than Isaiah, namely Jeremiah (today), Baruch, Zephaniah & Micah. In a consistent way, along with Isaiah, these prophets announced to Israel & Judah in the 8<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, the promise that God would save His people despite the devastations the Jewish nation experienced around the time of the Exile. In a time of extreme hopelessness, they offered hope. Against all the outward evidence of the time, the social and political disasters, they preached God's faithfulness: "*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 ... a righteous Branch [shall] spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.*" The point of our hearing these OT prophets in Advent is to show us that just as God fulfilled the ancient promises to Israel in the coming of the Messiah, so we who await His Second Coming — the justice and righteousness of the End of Time — can know that He is with us, and will in His own time fulfil those promises just as surely and powerfully. To have Advent hope is to know that what He

promised of old, He made good on; so what Jesus then promised when He came, He will also make good on. Nothing can shake this faith of ours to its foundations, even when lawlessness and immorality seem to multiply around us, and deviation from the Law of God is rife; even when hitherto unthinkable laws are passed. Hope springs eternal, and this Advent provides us with ample sources of hope. St Luke has Christ's words re-iterating this application of hope: "*Watch yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the cares of life ... Stay awake at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.*"

Advent, then, is a season of hope and a season of preparation: the purple liturgical colour expresses a moderation, a need for attentiveness. It's *not* the same as the season of fasting and penance that precedes Easter, in Lent. But it still has the flavour of lovely simplicity and prayerfulness, and a sense that *the feast is still to come*, a little way off, and that *we need to get our hearts ready*.

Let's inculcate that virtue of hope, shall we, by keeping Advent well? Let's not neglect this beautiful season of Advent; let's not pretend that it's Christmas already, and just ignore Advent. As Christians we will *want* to prepare for Christmas properly, and not rush headlong into an unreclected, December-long, quasi-Christmas. *Waiting and longing for Christmas* helps train us in hope; the yearning expands our hearts and opens them up in readiness for the coming of the Saviour. If we are in any kind of darkness now — sadness, frustration, sorrow over the state of our society, or the state of our soul — then allow this season to carry you from darkness to light, from sorrow to joy, from Black Friday to Christmas. Advent can do that; it's really very beautiful. As December proceeds and your studies thin out a bit, take the time that that affords you to pray more, especially for an increased attitude of hopefulness. Christmas is coming! Jesus who once came, who comes now on this altar, will come again. *Jesus my hope, my Love, my life: come, Lord Jesus, come again, come into my heart and renew my hope; make my Advent full of hope!*