

2nd Sunday of Advent (C)

8th December 2024

‘Make your heart a cleansed home for the baby Jesus’

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*

To my mind, Advent is a play in three parts, and each with its cast of players, characters who overlap but are somewhat distinct. The **first part** (“Part IA”) has the suite of OT prophets, with lead character, Isaiah, but including such minor prophets as Baruch (the exiled secretary of Jeremiah) from whom we hear today. We thought, last Sunday, about the meaning of prophesy, and the Advent hope that springs from reflecting on the prophetic message. Today’s text from Baruch is filled with that *greatest of all hopes*: the Messiah, who when He comes, brings to an end the exile of humanity from our heavenly homeland.

The **next part of Advent** (we might call it “Part IB”) which include the middle days of Advent, and both the middle (2nd & 3rd) Sundays, has as its main character a man who straddled the Old & New Testaments — the final OT prophet and the first Christian martyr and saint — St John the Baptist. Today we have the beginning of Lk 3, which

first introduces him into the narrative; next Sunday we’ll have a substantially longer part of Lk 3, giving greater details about his preaching ministry and message. I’ll come back to him in a minute.

Just to complete this brief overview of Advent: the **last part of Advent** is “Part II”, a gear shift in Advent for the final octave of prayer and preparation for Christmas beginning on 17th December. It features characters from the infancy narratives of Mt & Lk, the well-known ones of many a Nativity play: Zechariah & Elizabeth, Mary & Joseph, the Angel Gabriel, ... who will then provide the lead-in to the Gospel texts for the Christmas Masses: angels, shepherds, sheep, ox & ass, Mr & Mrs Inn-keeper, camels, Magi *et al.* Anyway, it’s almost ten more days until that Part II of Advent begins, between the 3rd and 4th Sundays. We’ll come to that, then ...

For now, let’s think a bit more about Luke’s Gospel itself. Last Sunday we began a new Church year (‘year C’), the year in which we’ll hear mostly St Luke’s Gospel on Sundays. Luke’s is a beautiful and distinctive Gospel,

and whilst the majority of his material is shared with Matthew & Mark, there are significant elements of his Gospel that are unique, and with unique emphases. Just to mention a few, quickly: ... (i) Luke was a **non-Jew**, a well-educated doctor, and missionary companion of St Paul, 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 Our Blessed Lady** (think of the Annunciation, the Infancy Narratives, the Gospel canticles etc.); (iv) he also emphasizes the presence and role of **women**, the **poor and marginalized**, and the **mercy of God**; (v) 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; (vi) and who can forget that immortalized Easter encounter ‘on the **road to Emmaus**’? — also and only in Luke. We have, therefore, a wonderful year ahead of us with Luke; Year C stretches before us for our nourishment in the Gospel of Jesus as given us by St Luke, “the beloved physician.”

Luke’s very formal beginning of ch. 3, that litany of rulers, including minor but despotic ones, such as Pontius Pilate the Roman procurator of Judaea, and Herod Antipas, puppet king of Galilee, is not just for rhetorical effect, but in fact is to *anchor in time* these saving events of John-the-Baptist’s appearance, and in due course the ministry of Jesus Christ. Luke is at pains to make it clear that *these things really happened*; they are not a figment of his, or any Christian’s, imagination. Herod Antipas reigned 4BC–39AD; Pontius Pilate had jurisdiction in Judaea 26–36AD. These are the time co-ordinates for the beginnings of our salvation: in that decade of Pilate’s governorship — *a fixed point in human history* — St John began his baptizing, and Jesus appeared openly. *History*, says St Luke: it is true and historical, and mankind cannot therefore ignore, or dismiss as make-believe, these events that the Gospel recounts.

The centre-piece of our Advent liturgy this 2nd Sunday is of course the core message of John the Baptist’s ministry at the River Jordan: this preaching of his is also foretold by Isaiah as a prophecy of great hope ... “*a voice*

of one crying in the wilderness, 'Prepare the Way of the Lord, make His paths straight ... and all flesh shall see the salvation of God'." His whole *raison-d'être* was to proclaim and prepare for the Messiah's imminent coming; he did so in strict accordance with what God had foretold of old: as a lone voice, an ascetic prophetic figure, clothed in camel hair and surviving on the lean produce of the wilderness. Luke explains how that played out in practice: "*a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*" No beating about the bush; to-the-point and on-message for the Messiah's appearing: "*Prepare the Way of the Lord!*"

St John the Baptist, then, is the ideal character for us to listen to and heed in this middle Advent period, for this preparation season demands of us, most of all, that we examine our consciences, and — having been baptized, as most of us already are — that we repent of our sins and seek the Lord's holy forgiveness in Confession. Advent, above any other duties of partying and present-buying is to make our hearts ready to be a place of welcome for the new-born Christ. As we would prepare the home in a

special way for a new-born member of the family to be welcomed — perhaps spring-cleaning and re-decorating a room for him or her to sleep in — so we need to refresh and make clean the *personal room* that the Christ-child wishes to make His home, in us. We want our soul's Temple to be a worthy, warm and welcoming home for Him, come Christmas. We want to receive worthily the Saviour, Christ, at His holy birth. We will want to make a truly devout Holy Communion with Him, receiving Him into our souls in the Holy Eucharist of our Christmas Mass ... and so, let's make good on that holy desire. Let's decide, therefore, today, here and now, in response to John the Baptist's insistent invitation at the Jordan, to be sure to receive the grace of Confession between now and Christmas. What is there? — what can we easily call to mind? — that is taking up room in our souls that Christ Himself should occupy? What's preventing His coming there, what sins? — what uncleansed, unopened, unlit, quarters of our life, that we could not be offering as a home to the new-born Baby Jesus? These dim quarters can be

refurbished, made new again, made fitting for Our Blessed baby Lord, through that simple act of Confession: just a few minutes of our Advent, and yet part of a lifetime of commitment to ongoing holiness.

When are you going to Confession, then, this Advent, if you have not already done so? *Don't dismiss or avoid the question*: it's the key, the spiritually best approach, to "*Preparing the Way for the Lord.*" (I need to ask myself the same question, too, as it's a few wks since I went. Every priest who is a Confessor, is also a penitent, used to *confessing* his sins, and not only *hearing* confessed sins. That makes him humble before this awesome Sacrament.) We've 3 Advent weekends left, so, all sorts of opportunities. To make it easier for you, as well as 6–7pm Sunday and 6–7pm Monday Confessions, I'm willing to return here after a while of tea and coffee (at 12.15pm) and stay until 12.45pm (or longer, if need be). Don't avoid Confession if you haven't been for a long time; don't avoid Confession if you're unsure where to begin; don't avoid Confession if you're perplexed about what is right and

wrong in your life at present: in all these circumstances the priest can gently guide you to make your Confession honestly before Jesus, the babe who is the God of mercy. *The most important thing is that you do come*, and don't keep putting it off through reluctance or resistance or rebellion; the Lord Jesus, "the babe, the Son of Mary," is asking you to make His crib in your heart. Who can resist such a heartfelt plea from one so tiny and so innocent and holy? He just wants to come; so, make that home of your heart ready: come to Jesus in Confession, and have Him make it ready. Be forgiven, cleansed, relieved, and happy! Say 'yes' to fully confessing your sins this sacred season, and all will be so much better. You will have done what John the Baptist came to that wilderness, and to the River Jordan, for, "*in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judaea, and Herod being Tetrarch of Galilee*" ... all those years ago, and yet calling to you, today, with the same life-giving message for the Lord's coming: "*repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ... make His paths straight.*"