

2nd Sunday of Advent, Year A: John the Baptist prepares Jesus' way.

1st Reading: Isaiah 11:1-10: The future king will bring an era of peace;

2nd Reading: Romans 15:4-9: God's plan – to save people through Jesus;

Gospel: Matthew 3:1-12: John the Baptist appears, with a strong message.

Last week, I wrote about the way the Church uses Advent to help us imagine a life before the Messiah appeared. This weekend, our readings are more tantalizing: Jesus has been born, but the gospel tells of John the Baptist's preaching just before Jesus starts his public life & work. I know that, outside of Church circles, the first three weeks of December are full of 'Christmassy' ideas: trees, lights, angels, snow scenes (even though this is not usually a snowy month), parties, ideas for gifts, etc - the list is endless; even cribs get the odd look-in!. So it may come as a disappointment to read of the work of John the Baptist this Sunday, but for Matthew, John fulfilled Isaiah's hope of 700 years earlier: "A voice cries in the wilderness: *Prepare a way for the Lord; make his paths straight.*" That was John's mission: unglamorous, risky, but essential.

Why was it 'essential'? The problem was that for centuries, the Jews had had no experience of prophets in the traditional sense – men clearly inspired by God, talking in language that might sound strange, but definitely offering God's teaching on current issues and future behaviour. It wasn't easy listening – and was not meant to be. (I remember old-style parish missions given by Redemptorist & Passionist priests in the 1950's and 1960's. In their hell-fire sermons, the stress was on mortal sin and the prospect of eternal damnation. Like Hammer horror films of that era, the scarier the content, the bigger the audience!) Similarly, John was blunt: to the Jewish elite (Pharisees and Sadducees – the two, main opposing parties), he said: "Brood of vipers, who warned you to fly from the retribution that is coming? But if you are repentant, produce the appropriate fruit." In some ways, this language seems more suitable to Lent; however, Advent is meant to be a 'penitential' season too – when we think of our weaknesses, and how to put them right. That's why priests wear purple. The Church wants us to prepare for Christmas spiritually – as opposed to financially – just as John had to prepare Israel for Christ's original coming.

In the run-up to Christmas, I suspect (perhaps tongue-in-cheek?) that we alternate between being optimists and being pessimists. The old joke was that optimists see the glass as half-full and say that every cloud has a silver lining; pessimists see the glass as half-empty and say that every silver lining means a cloud. The prophet Isaiah felt the same way about his country: the royal family

(descendants of David's father, Jesse) were a national joke – a byword for incompetence and corruption. That was the pessimistic bit – a depression he shared with most people in Israel at that time. Yet he strikes an optimistic note in this Sunday's first reading: from that chaotic family, "a shoot springs from the stock of Jesse" – meaning a child will soon be born – "on whom the spirit of the Lord rests". As an adult, he "will not judge by appearances...but judge the wretched with integrity..." That expectation of justice (and with it, peace) was amazing, in a time of fear and suspicion, when few had any hope for the future.

At the public level this year, Christians in the UK would seem to have a lot to be pessimistic about. The analysis of the 2021 census results (in my paper last Wednesday) shows an increasingly sharp decline in Christian belief & practice. In England & Wales, only 46% now call themselves "Christian" – compared with nearly 60% ten years ago. Those with "no religion" (atheists, who say there is no god at all, along with agnostics, who don't know and/or are not interested in the issue) have gone from 25% in 2010 to 37% in 2021. There are many factors behind all this – eg, the death of many of the older generation; the influence of social media on younger people; the immigration of many people from non-Christian countries; the big impact of the public media (especially TV) who regularly broadcast material showing all religion as either stupid or wicked – something that "modern" people should really abandon. So, is there anything that could cheer us, as Isaiah offered hope about 730 BC?

Yes, I think there is, but we must use our brains and avoid looking for simple solutions. At the time of some of the great saints in history, the Church was in a desperate state - just as the 2021 census implies we are now. In Francis of Assisi's time, (1200-ish) Catholic Europe seemed rotten. 400 years later, another Francis – this time of Sales - was made Bishop of Geneva, where the Presbyterian Reformers were in total control. These two saints did not work magic, but they created an atmosphere of hope, and started programmes of reform, on which others built. Without being critical of current leaders, our Church in this country is crying out for strong, spiritual leadership. Whoever becomes the next Archbishop of Westminster, I hope he offers a prophetic voice to the Church, with a chance to challenge the anti-religious bias of the media.

These are not easy times for us, whether publicly for the Church as a whole, or privately, with family finances in crisis. Current TV ads strike me as sillier than usual. More than ever, we need to find Isaiah's "way of the Lord". *Fr Jim Dunne.*