

2nd Sunday of Advent (A)

8th December 2016

‘Prepare the way for the Lord!’

Is 11: a shoot springs from the stock of Jesse flourish ... Ps 71: in His days justice 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 ...*

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.

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 of 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.” 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! 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!

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.

Advent, then, is a crucial season to come to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, to Confession, and so, above all, I want to highlight for you the importance of, and the wonderful opportunity of, the parish Penitential Services, which take place on Monday 19th December. There will be two services, to try to cater for you all, whatever your schedule: one is in the daytime, 11.30am; and one is in the evening, 7.30pm. These services provide a chance to come *together* to acknowledge jointly that we all need forgiveness and reconciliation, both with God and with each other. Our sins damage our relationship with God, but they offend others too. By coming together, initially, for a short service, we encourage each other to be open to the Lord's forgiveness. We gather to hear the Word of God inviting us to trust in His mercy; and then in private, with the priest, in the normal way of Confession, to confess our sins and receive absolution, the guarantee of sacramental forgiveness. No other more beautiful and sure way is there to be released from our

sins, especially if they are grave sins. So, even if it's been some time since Confession, make this a special date for Advent: Monday of the last week of Advent. 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 God Himself, His forgiveness, the relief of a soul unburdened from guilt and sin.

This is how we recover 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, let's not 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 the date of the Penitential Services — 19th December — clearly in your minds; and make a prayer of commitment now, to be here that day; or, if absolutely impossible that day, then to get to Confession some other 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.*