

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

2<sup>nd</sup> December 2018

‘Scripture I: Old Testament’

*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 ...*

Today we begin today a new Church year — ‘year C,’ this is the year we hear mostly Luke’s Gospel on Sundays — and I’ve set myself the task of preaching to you over the Advent Sundays something about Scripture itself. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent is always ‘Bible Sunday, so this year I thought I’d use the convenience of there being 4 Sundays in Advent to preach about the 4 parts of the Liturgy of the Word, when we hear the Scripture proclaimed at Mass every Sunday. Each week we hear a 1<sup>st</sup> Reading usually from the Old Testament; a Response which is almost always from the OT book of the Psalms; a 2<sup>nd</sup> Reading which is customarily from the Letters of the Apostolic-era writers, mostly St Paul; and then we stand with special respect for the final biblical reading, from one or other of the four Gospels (this year, starting today, St Luke’s). In the coming weeks I want to give you a bit of a guide around the Liturgy of the Word, to help you

appreciate better this first half of Mass. The readings are not an optional extra at Mass, but a crucial part of the appreciation of what God has done — and does — for us, both before Christ, and in Christ. We certainly shouldn’t consider the 1<sup>st</sup> half of Mass as the less important, and we should always be here in good time for the start of Mass; even better would be to have read the readings beforehand either at home, or here in church prior to Mass’s beginning.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Reading is drawn from the Old Testament (except in Eastertide, when instead we hear from the Acts of the Apostles). Now, the OT is a vast and complex series of works, not by one author, but by many authors, and written and edited together over a huge long period from about 1200 years BC right up to the century before Christ. Mostly written originally in Hebrew, though some parts in Greek, the Old Testament books consist of 3 major types of writing, and this is the order in which they are usually published: History (21 bks, starting with the Torah (Gen. to Deut.) and going through Israel’s history to the books of the Maccabees); Wisdom literature (7 bks, including Job,

Psalms and Proverbs); and then the Prophets (18 bks, including long works such as Isaiah and Jeremiah, and some very short works, too, such as the 12 minor prophets).

We only read a small fraction of the Old Testament over the course of the 3-year cycle of Sundays — perhaps about 4% (but 14% if you add in the readings for weekday Masses) — but still, the selection of OT readings we get to hear at Mass is a rich and varied selection from the vast treasure of the Jewish Scriptures. The OT Readings at Mass generally follow no pattern other than being chosen to shed light on the Gospel reading to come. They show how what is fulfilled in Christ is prepared for by God in His revelation to mankind in former times, most especially in the history and the faith of the peoples of Israel.

Nowhere is that clearer than in all the prophecies that we will be hearing in this holy season of Advent. Most of the OT readings that we shall hear in the days of Advent are from the 1<sup>st</sup> part of the prophet Isaiah, whose words on the coming of the Messiah are so powerful and touching, even though he wrote some 8 centuries before Christ. But in

Advent / Year C, for the 4 Sundays, we get the words of other prophets, who lived similarly long ago: Jeremiah, Baruch, Zephaniah and Micah. Today's words from Jeremiah sum up just why we owe such a lot to those prophecies of old. We see just why we should have Advent hope in Jesus's coming, when we think how those faithful Jewish believers longed for God to act, and then He did:

<sup>14</sup> “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. <sup>15</sup> In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring forth for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.”

We can only interpret the OT in the light of the NT, the light of Christ, for all of Scripture ultimately speaks of Jesus, “the one who was to come” and then *did* come. Without all that backup of the OT, we don't see the beauty of God's complete plan, and our Christian faith is cut adrift from its Jewish roots. So let's listen attentively this Advent to the promises God gave to our ancestors of old, and which He fulfilled in the coming of our Saviour Jesus Christ. Let's long to feel that blessing of ancient fulfilment, which gives us such hope and peace for today and for the future.