

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

1<sup>st</sup> December 2019

‘Scripture I: Isaiah’

Is 2: In the days that are to come ...      Ps 121:  
Rom 13: *wake up now: our salvation is even nearer ...*  
Mt 24: *stay awake ... stand ready because the Son of Man is coming ...*

Our English bishops have asked that this year, 2019–20, is kept as a ‘Year of the Word’ — a chance to focus very specially on Scripture. The year is entitled, ‘The God Who Speaks,’ which is a good reminder that, as Pope Benedict says in the quotation on the front of this week’s newsletter, “while in the Church we greatly venerate the sacred Scriptures ..., the Christian faith is not a ‘religion of the book’: Christianity is the ‘religion of the Word of God,’ not of a ‘written and mute word, but of the incarnate and living Word’.” It is, then ‘God Who Speaks,’ and not ‘God Who Writes’: God who reveals Himself by the words through history: His prophets, saints and evangelists, and above all by His own spoken Word-made-flesh, Jesus Christ.

The ‘Year of the Word’ started officially at the end of September with the feast of St Jerome, the great scholar and biblical translator of the 4<sup>th</sup> c., who lived many of his later years in a cave in Bethlehem, very close by the Manger

Grotto where Our Lord is believed to have been born. But with the beginning of the new Church year today, we start in earnest, and Advent is so rich in its Scripture readings that it’s an ideal time to get going!

The thing you’ll notice about Advent and the Scripture readings offered to us in this season — apart from the fact that with the new Church year we change Gospel (from Luke to Matthew this time) — is that it is dominated by readings from the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah is our great guide to Advent — we hear of him throughout Advent, every Sunday and on most of the weekdays, right up to Midnight Mass and Christmas Day. Isaiah is the greatest prophet of the Messiah, promising to Israel the one who was to come. 750yrs before Christ, Isaiah was inspired by God to speak of the One who was to come. Three-quarters of a millennium, that is, of waiting! Isaiah is truly a prophet of longing ... seeing afar off the plan of God to bring a new and wonderful era of salvation to Israel. “In the days to come ...,” he says, “all the nations will stream to ... the Temple of the Lord.” Isaiah helps us to see that the Lord

has had a long-term plan for Creation and for our world. The coming of the Messiah, of Jesus the incarnate Son of God — all this was foreseen, planned and promised by God from the very beginning. God is not in a hurry, and brings all things to pass when He knows is right. That's why it's good for us to have seasons like Advent in which we wait, and pray, meditate on God's promises and His faithful fulfilment of those promises in Christ.

In fact, this is how we as Christians are always called on to read the Old Testament. We read the Old Testament in the light of the New Testament; and we see that the New is prepared for by the Old. We cannot read them apart. We can neither ditch the Old Testament as Christians as if it didn't matter; nor can we try and interpret the Old Testament without forward reference to Christ's coming in the fullness of time. This is also how we are generally presented the OT readings in the Sunday lectionary for Mass — the OT reading is chosen to enlighten us with regard to the Gospel. The main thrust of the Isaiah readings in Advent is to show how the long-awaited Messiah, the one

whom God revealed through His prophet in a variety of moving passages, is perfectly fulfilled in Jesus.

So, with regard to how we might live our Advent well this year, having a special focus on Scripture, the best way, without a doubt, is to come to *weekday Mass*. I really urge and invite you, if you are ever free on weekdays — even just *some* weekdays — to make that special effort in Advent to be here Mon–Sat, not just on Sunday. In this way, you will be able to hear all the beautiful Isaiah prophecies and the Gospel passages that are matched with them. The Scriptures were written down to be used principally within the liturgy — that's how the Jews use them, too, in readings proclaimed, and psalms sung, by the congregation at prayer. The bible finds its best context in the living worship of the people of God. Of course, we can read the Word of God in private, too, but that always comes from, and leads us back to, the community in which they were written and then spoken, sung, and prayed. May this 'Year of the Word' ahead help us to listen with a more active and loving heart to 'The God Who Speaks' to us in Scripture.