

Dear Friends,

It was a pity we could not gather in church last Sunday for the beginning of Advent, but at least we can do so this Sunday and light the first two candles on the Advent Wreath, one of the attractive features of this season. The four purple candles are said to represent Hope, Peace, Love and Joy, and are associated with characters significant to this time: God's people, the prophets, John the Baptist and the Virgin Mary. Wreaths often have a larger white candle in the middle to be lit at Christmas for Christ himself.

This second Sunday of Advent is sometimes also known as Bible Sunday, since it has a theme of the Scriptures and especially the Old Testament prophets. As we saw two weeks on the feast of Christ the King Everyone baptised takes on the threefold role of Christ to be a priest, prophet and king, the term prophet in this sense meaning one who speaks the word of God, not so much one who foretells the future. Those we call prophets do in fact as much looking back as forward, as they call the people to remember how God has dealt with them in the past, how he led them out of slavery and death in Egypt and brought them to the promised land. Memory is one of our most precious and important human faculties. We probably spend quite a lot of time looking back on our lives and remembering what has happened to us, the good things and the bad, regretting some things and hoping that the good we may enjoy again.

We know of course that the past is gone, we cannot go back to it or bring it back, but if we remember how God has been good to us before now that can give us hope that he will be good to us again in the present and on into the future. To make an inventory of your life and how you have been aware of God's love and guidance in it, a faith autobiography as it is often called, can be a helpful spiritual exercise. Some people even keep a diary noting each day how they have been aware of God and keeping it to hand to add to and look back over. Memory can strengthen faith.

As well as remembering the past we also spend time projecting into the future, dreaming of what it may be, hoping it will be better if our present is not pleasing. The prophets too are often looking forward, making prophecies as we say of what the future will bring. This is particularly true of the great prophet whose writings we read extensively in Advent, Isaiah. The book we call by his name was not in fact written all at once by one person, but by several people over some centuries. Scholars identify three stages, the first attributed to the historical figure of the 8th century B.C., the second and third to other writers who were associated with his legacy.

Some of the most inspiring passages of our Scriptures come from the part called Second Isaiah, chapters 40 to 55, the beginning of which we hear as the first reading of this Sunday's Mass, best known perhaps as the first words sung in Handel's *Messiah*:

*Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith the Lord.
Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her
that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned. ...
And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together.*

The comfort or consolation being proclaimed here is a very specific one: it is the return of God's people from exile and captivity in Babylon to their homeland and the rebuilding of the holy city around the year 540 B.C. - made possible by the Persian emperor Cyrus (do you remember him from a few weeks ago?). But Isaiah's scope is not confined to one historical event. He looks forward to what Judaism called "the age to come," the time when the earth would be transformed by God bringing about his kingdom of justice, love and peace, ushered in by the coming of the Messiah.

As Christians we believe that the Messiah has already come in the person of Christ, but we too look forward in hope to the fullness of God's kingdom. Advent has this twofold aspect: the God whose future coming we hope for is the God who has already come among us and is present with us now, as in his Son he shares the whole of our humanity - so that we may share the whole of his divinity. We say that Advent is the preparation for Christmas, but in one sense we cannot prepare for the birth of Christ. What we prepare for is its celebration and everything it means for us. How do we go about that?

The second letter of St. Peter, which provides the second reading of this Sunday's Mass, has these words:

*What we are waiting for is what he promised:
the new heavens and the new earth, where righteousness will be at home.
So then, my friends, while you are waiting, do your best
to live lives without spot or stain so that he will find you at peace.*

We could say that this is our task in Advent: to live our lives as best we can, in touch with God through prayer and service, so that we are ready for God's coming to us at whatever moment he chooses. And not just in Advent: this is what we must be about our whole life long. Advent is almost in this way the season of seasons, because it focuses on our essential human condition.

As we light the second candle on the Advent Wreath let its light be a sign of all that we hope and long for as God's people.

Wishing you every blessing, Fr. Robin (robinburgess@rcdow.org.uk)