Sermon for 2nd in Advent Year A

Readings: Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

i

Good news – God is coming soon! This is the Advent theme as we approach Christmas that is picked up in our Bible readings today.

Just as we are looking forward to Christmas with anticipation, expecting it to be a happy time, so too the faithful of Isaiah’s day are supposed to look eagerly for the imminent arrival of God’s Chosen One.

This anticipation is all the sweeter in Isaiah because it comes so dramatically after a time of desolation. The tree has been cut down; a dead stump is all that remains; it proclaims the death of its former glory; its beauty, power and life just a memory. Yet there is renewed hope – the tree puts forth a new shoot, a harbinger of new life, new hope and fruitful years ahead.

The stump of Jesse is clearly a metaphor for the renewal of the house of David, for by verse 2, the new shoot is a person, the new royal son who will be blessed by the Spirit of God, bringing wisdom, power and true faith to the people. Such qualities in the heir to the throne are worth celebrating in one who is destined to rule over the lives of many.

Although the actual word ‘Messiah’ is not used, the passage is thoroughly messianic in tone. When this passage from Isaiah of Jerusalem was read by later generations in Exile, the hope of rebirth for their decapitated nation was stirred by such powerful imagery.

St. Paul quotes this passage from Isaiah in his *Letter to the Romans*. The image of new life coming from what is apparently dead has obviously powerful resonance among Christians. The image of a small new shoot which has the potential to grow into a new branch laden with fruit also has inspiring connotations for the young Church. Paul uses similar horticultural imagery earlier in this *Letter* when he speaks of the Christian Church as a wild olive branch being grafted onto the old stump.

The news that God can bring new life to old trees is still an image of hope for the Church today. Many of us worship in congregations that are a mere shadow of their former selves. The experience of many Christians in the West has been of a dying Church, withering before our eyes through the hot, dry days of western secular materialism. The reminder that new life can always spring up from what is apparently dead is still an inspiring dream.

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Yet it’s not all good news. The arrival of God brings with it a time of judgement. It is a time when past records will be checked and those adequately prepared will join the new party, whilst those who have neglected their duties risk being left outside.

In Isaiah 11:3 the royal son who is to come will “delight” in finding the ‘fear of the Lord.’ In Hebrew the actual word for “delight” is the word “smell”. It is as if this messianic figure will sniff out the truth of our faithfulness.

We usually suppose that the human nose is very poor compared to other creatures. The polar bear, for example, can smell you or any other animal that might be on the lunch menu from 60 miles away when you have a pee. We cannot match such olfactory feats with our nose, and most of us might be relieved about that, but the human sense of smell is far better than is commonly supposed. Our sense of taste virtually disappears if we lose our sense of smell.

It is through the sense of smell that we access our most powerful memories; a smell of bread baking, wood burning, hot oil on steel, or a particular perfume can instantly transport us back to places and times we did not know we remembered.

It is no accident that we use the phrase – “I smell a rat” – meaning that we detect something is wrong even though things may look, sound and feel OK. The sense of smell gives the game away and provides us with a truth that can be lost to the other senses.

The Bible knows this too and uses the sense of smell to this effect.

In Ephesians 5:2 – “Christ loved us and gave his life for us as a sweet smelling offering and sacrifice that pleases God.”

In Genesis we often suppose that what convinced blind Isaac to give his blessing to Jacob rather than to Esau was when he touched the goatskins on Jacob’s arm, for Jacob “was a smooth man” and Esau was a “hairy man”. Yet in Gen 27:27 we read that Isaac double-checked it was the son he thought it was when he kissed Jacob and caught the smell of Esau’s clothing that Jacob was wearing. Blind old Isaac may have been fooled, but only because Jacob and Rebekah thought of a ruse to deceive Isaac’s sense of smell.

So what Isaiah 11:3 means is that the royal son who is coming will judge with precision; he will not be duped by outward appearances or fine words. He will “sniff out” the truth and so his judgements will be sound.

Our gospel reading today from Matthew 3 has more judgement than good news. John the Baptist announces the imminent arrival of the Messiah, so eagerly awaited for so long, but the promise sounds more like a threat in the way John also decries the “brood of vipers” and announces that “even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire” and he comes “with his winnowing fork in his hand” to burn up the chaff “with unquenchable fire.”

John the Baptist hasn’t quite got into the Christmas spirit yet in this reading. Yet it serves as a timely reminder to those of us who just opt for the simple, romantic, baby Jesus in his manger that the very presence of God brings judgement, for it reveals like a bright, shining light all that lurks in the darker corners of our lives and communities.

The Advent season exists for the same purpose as Lent exists – to encourage us to sober self-assessment and repentance, before we let ourselves go in the joyful celebration of Christmas or Easter. Advent asks us: are we truly ready to meet Jesus?

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Despite the preponderance of doom in the Baptist’s cry, the coming of Christ is still Good News for the world – even if it will bring a rude awakening to some who have let their standards slip. The ultimate purpose of judgement is not because God delights in punishing evil-doers and wishes to mete out pain and anguish. The purpose of judgement is to cleanse the world of all that is harmful and establish peace, love and truth in a kingdom where death and suffering are no more.

All of us have fallen short of God’s standards to one degree or another; not one of us deserves admittance to such a place of light and love, but God has sent his Son Jesus Christ so that the greatest sinner may enter that place of peace and forgiveness, if they simply entrust themselves to Jesus.

Even the brood of vipers may, if they so wish, come and find salvation at the crib of Jesus.

In Isaiah’s memorable poetic image, the coming reign of peace is described as when the wolf will lie with the lamb, the leopard with the goat, the cow will feed with the bear and the infant will play with the viper’s brood.

Like other commentators who look at this passage, I too am not sure how the waters can “cover the sea” – unless it means sweet fresh water shall replace the salty, unruly sea.

In Paul’s *Letter to the Romans*, the kingdom of peace means the reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles through Christ. This is no distant dream of heaven, but a foretaste of heaven which may be experienced in the here and now in the Church.

This is why a divided Church is such an abomination. It is a denial of the gospel and a contradiction of all we say Jesus has come to achieve for humanity. If Christians cannot love one another, can we wonder that the world finds it hard to believe?

Ecumenism should not be an added extra when all other things have been done; ecumenism should not be left for one intensive week every year; ecumenism is not designed to make us all the same – but to bring us together in harmony.

Magi from the east and shepherds from the Judean hills come together around the manger in our Christmas story. That image of a reconciled world must lie at the heart of what all churches strive to create.

So Advent is also a time in the run-up to Christmas to heal divisions and forgive old scores which the past year has brought, and to gather family, friends and community together to dream of peace. It was Christmas that silenced the guns of war in 1914; may it silence them again this year.

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