

## Advent is the Time for Prophecy

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It is all too easy to overlook Advent as we prepare for Christmas – but this is the time to remember what Christians really look forward to and the preparations we must make. Andrew Cameron-Mowat SJ describes how the Advent readings guide us through our hopeful waiting for the coming of Christ.

Advent is fast becoming the “forgotten” season in our Calendar; already shops are full of decorations to attract our eye, we hear the sound of tinkling bells and merry carols, and even the scent of spices and pine tempts our nostrils as we pass through these precious few weeks before Christmas. But this is not a time for looking forward to a little child in Bethlehem, so much as a time to wait in expectation for the coming of Christ who leads us into our future. Advent calls us to consider who we are as Christians and how we hear the voices of ancient prophecy.

The prophet of this season par excellence is Isaiah. Our lectionary provides us, at the beginning of a new liturgical year, with a rich selection from this book of the Old Testament. Through it, we can experience the longing and the expectation of the generations of peoples who pray and hope for salvation and for freedom from slavery of one kind or another that continues to oppress the innocent, the poor and the downtrodden.

The preparation for this season in last week's liturgy was striking: on Monday we heard Jesus express admiration for the poor widow who gave all she had left as an offering, perhaps as a last gesture of her total dependence on God; Tuesday and Wednesday brought warnings about earthquakes, famines and plagues, as well as of nations fighting each other; on Thursday, Jesus encouraged us not to give in to our fears, but to stand up and hold our heads high. In a climate of



war, natural disaster and poverty, Jesus is reminding us to place all our trust in the Lord our God, and not to become hostages of the fear that “false” prophets use to manipulate us for their own profit.

Sunday by Sunday during Advent, the prophetic voice of Isaiah speaks directly to us with surprising and ever-contemporary force. Isaiah reminds us that we must be in right relationship with God, particularly

in times of distress. He prays “Lord, you are our Father; we the clay, you the power, we are all the work of your hands” (64:7) and we realise our utter dependence on God's help. Isaiah was speaking at a time when the people were not following the ways of the Covenant. His words are also contemporary: the coming of the Messiah will be a time, not simply for salvation, but also for judgement: what are we proud of as a civilisation, and is there need for repentance? Can we stand before our risen Lord when he comes in glory and say that we have been good and faithful servants?

During this time of economic uncertainty and real hardship for so many people, the words of Isaiah continue to encourage us with their promise of hope. “Console my people, console them” says your God”, (40:1) proclaims the Prophet. The scriptures for the Second Sunday in Advent echo this theme of reassurance in difficult times. “The Lord will make us prosper and our earth shall yield its fruit. Justice shall march before him and peace shall follow his steps. (Psalm 84).

As we move further into Advent the voice of Isaiah continues to call to us, with his vision of a promise yet to be fulfilled, his words of comfort and hope yet to be realised fully. For Christians it is Christ who “brings good news to the poor, to bind up hearts that are broken, to proclaim liberty to captives, and freedom to those in prison.” (Isaiah 61:1-2) The kingdom we long for needs each one of us to hear this good news, to have our own hearts healed. We need truly to hear the voice of truth and to proclaim it. As Christ heals us, so he also sends us out to complete the mission he gave to his disciples. The child born in Bethlehem enters a world still very much in need of its saviour.

Our Emmanuel is to be the fulfilment of the hopes and dreams of generations. Isaiah prophesied that “the maiden is with child” (20<sup>th</sup> December) to emphasise that no matter how terrible and fearful the situation, God would not abandon the people. As we continue to hope and pray for the glory of the Kingdom of Christ, we dream with the prophet during Advent for the grace of lasting peace and unfailing love.

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