

## **The Second Sunday of Advent – December 5<sup>th</sup>, 2021**

### **A Reflection by Fr Sylvester O’Flynn OFM Cap., Rochestown, Cork**

#### **Prepare a way for the Lord**

“The word of God came to John son of Zechariah, in the wilderness.”

I really love Advent. Each season of the liturgical year has its own rich spirituality, but I think Advent has the message that is most relevant at the moment, at least in the state of the Church in Western Europe. Advent is the season of hope in the middle of winter. The Church here is experiencing winter in many ways: very few priests under the age of seventy: there are very few seminarians studying for the priesthood. How many young people are coming to Mass? Society has huge problems relating to drugs, break-up of marriage and virtually every night the News tells of another murder. The restrictions, anxieties and financial problems due to the prolongation of the Corona virus have plunged many people into a dark place.

#### **The turn of the tide**

Having grown up beside the sea I am aware that the tide has to go out fully before it starts to come back in. How long do we have to wait for the turn of the tide? When will it happen that people will realize that we need something more in life ... some sort of belief, some sturdy code of morality, some basis for hope? We are in a right mess, a wilderness. I draw hope from the line in today’s Gospel that the word of God came to John the Baptist in the wilderness. It wasn’t in Rome, the political centre, or in Jerusalem, the religious capital, but in the wilderness.

#### **The lowest times in history produced the greatest saints**

Church history shows that the lowest times produced the greatest saints and reformers. Back in the twelfth century people like Saints Dominic and Francis returned to a simple style of living according to the gospel. Without planning to be reformers, they hit the right button and thousands followed them. Somebody said that nothing can stop an idea that has reached its time. Similarly, in the mess of a very political Church in the sixteenth century, all of a sudden there emerged an extraordinary bevy of saints and reformers like Ignatius of Loyola, Francis de Sales, Philip Neri, Charles Borromeo, Jane Frances de Chantal and many more, too many to mention. The wilderness of the time was quickly transformed into a wonderful garden of humble administrators, enthusiastic missionaries, founders of hospitals, preachers, spiritual writers and so on. G.K. Chesterton said that there were five times when the Church went to the dogs. But it was the dogs who died!

Advent is a season of waiting. Waiting can be a time of agitation and fear of the worst. But waiting could also be a time of expectancy and hope, like children looking forward to Santa Claus. Advent’s waiting is a time to prepare for the celebration of the coming of the Saviour.

Who can celebrate Advent? Only those who know their need of a Saviour. Unless you honestly face the needs of the Church, the mess in society and your personal problems, you will not appreciate the coming of the Saviour.

#### **Prepare a way for the Lord**

John the Baptist left the comforts of family life to embrace an ascetical way of life in a wilderness. In those days, the unproductive area of the wilderness, home to untamed beasts, was regarded as a territory controlled by evil spirits. That is why people who felt the call to a life of fasting and prayer went into the wilderness, as it were to confront the evil spirits on their own pitch. And it was there, in the wilderness, that the word of God came to John, inspiring him to return to normal society to prepare people for the coming of the Saviour.

According to the evangelists, this voice from the wilderness recalled the imagery of the prophets of an earlier generation who prepared the exiles in Babylon for their return to beloved Jerusalem. “Prepare a way for the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley will be filled in, every

mountain and hill be laid low, winding ways will be straightened and rough ways made smooth. And all mankind shall see the salvation of God.”

### **What can I do?**

As we wait in hope and expectancy for the turning of the tide at the reform of the Church and society, we can apply to ourselves the imagery of the road of return.

I may have paths to straighten where I have been devious and deceptive, or less than totally honest.

The valleys to be filled in are the areas where I have neglected prayer. I may have allowed my mind to be taken over by misleading thoughts and allowed the flame of faith to be reduced to dying embers.

The mountains to be laid low are the obstacles which I imagine to be insurmountable because I have forgotten to trust in God.

The hills to be levelled are those areas of pride and superiority when I looked down on others and judged them in an unfavourable light.

The rough ways to be made smooth are the jagged edges of my personality which irritate others or make me rub them up the wrong way – my insensitivities, my lack of generosity, being unwilling to compromise, my dominance of others in subtle ways.

All God wants of you in Advent is that you would prepare the way for the coming of the Saviour, the bringer of life, light and love.

### **An Advent Prayer**

O God of life, come to winter's branches where our lives bear no fruit, where our efforts have failed, where our hope has faltered and the sap of energy has dried up. We are poor and we need a Saviour. Come, Lord Jesus, come.

O God of light, come to our dark areas where we have been taken over by fears, anxiety and untamed powers of temptation. We are poor and we need a Saviour. Come, Lord Jesus, come.

O God of love, desiring to dwell in our hearts, come and heal the unredeemed areas where we block your love, areas of jealousy, lust, impatience, pride, anger and bitterness. We are poor and we need a Saviour. Come, Lord Jesus, come.