

THE FRIST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Jer. 33:14-16

1 Thess. 3:12 – 4:2

Lk. 21:25-28, 36-38

In this first part of Advent our readings focus on the Second Coming of Christ at the end of time. At the beginning of a new liturgical year we are reminded of what our focus in life should be. The following homilies vary considerably in their focus, but the message is the same.

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT 2003

(Here the focus is on short-term gratification endemic in our society.)

In reading up about our Scripture Readings today one author contrasted our present day culture with that at the time in which St. Paul and St. Luke were writing. She noted that whereas in our day the prevailing mood is *“Have now, pay later,”* the culture in our Readings was *“Pay now, have later.”* I can see some merit in this contrast.

“Have now, pay later” certainly seems to fit with the current disquiet about how much accumulated debt people have got into in this country – buying all kinds of things with credit cards and loans, and then having great difficulty with the repayments, especially if interest rates rise. No longer, as in previous generations, is it a case of save up and then buy, there is a craving in our society to have **now**. The virtue of **patience**, of **waiting** is not one that is highly valued – and yet this is the virtue that is pushed to the fore in this early part of Advent, which is not so much about Jesus’ First Coming at Christmas, as it is about his Second Coming at the end of time. This is where our culture differs enormously from that of New Testament times.

It seems clear that in the early years, even the early decades after Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, he was expected back at any time to bring things to a close. Jesus himself had not written anything down for future generations, he had not given the disciples a blueprint for forming a church that could carry on preaching the message for generation after generation. They, and we, have to work that out for ourselves.

St. Paul in our Second Reading has a particularly urgent tone about what he says *“urging”* people on to live the virtuous life. Even when St. Luke writes down his Gospel because the original witnesses to Jesus’ life, death and resurrection are dying off, there is still that urgent tone, *“Watch yourselves, Stay awake praying at all times.”* And along with those words in today’s Gospel we have parables like the rich landowner with the bumper harvest who pulls down his barn to build a bigger one. Remember how he says to himself, *“My soul, you have plenty of things laid by for many years to come, eat, drink and be merry, have a good timer.”* But, we are told, *“God said to him, ‘Fool, this very night the demand will be made for your soul and this land of yours, whose will it be then?’”*

Such a level of readiness is impossible to maintain day after day, year after year, generation after generation. And yet it is fundamental to our faith that what we accumulate and enjoy in this life is not the be all and end all of our life.

I was reminded a few weeks ago of a rather stark and, to some people perhaps a rather morbid story. A few years ago some of the Head teachers of the leading Public Schools were asked what the aim of their expensive education was – to produce the next generations of the captains of industry, the leaders of the country, the top civil servants and military personnel - was the answer given by most of them. But one of them said quite bluntly *“to prepare our pupils for their death.”* That answer came from the Headmaster of Ampleforth – one George Basil Hume.

I’m not entirely happy with the idea of *“Pay now, have later”* as a way of life in the sense that all we have is God’s free and living gift to us as of **real** hope for the future life but it sure beats *“Have now, pay later”* as a way of life.

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT 2006

(In this particular year some people from the RCIA programme were making their first public commitment to the journey towards Baptism/Reception.)

After the homily this morning three people are going to make the next step on their particular Journey of Faith. For a couple of months now in the Journey in Faith sessions on Tuesdays they have been explaining various aspects of the Christian Catholic Faith and want to continue this Journey. In the little Rite that follows they will be invited to

“Learn to know Christ and follow him.”

This Journey may or may not lead them to want to be baptised or received into Communion at Easter. It is part of a process – and the process of getting to know Christ and follow him does not end with Baptism and Confirmation – it continues throughout life.

For those of us who were baptised as babes in arms – and I suspect that is most of us here – we might be tempted to think, *“Well, we’ve arrived. We’ve done it all.”* Perhaps not at Baptism – maybe by the time we made our First Communion, or when we were confirmed by the Bishop. Well, we certainly ended the process of Initiation into the Faith then – but not the Journey which is as long as our life.

Notice what is going on in our Readings from the Liturgy today. Although the words of the Gospel were spoken by Jews to the disciples **before** his death and resurrection, they are remembered and shared with disciples of St. Luke’s time, and ours, because of their on- going relevance. Even after Initiation into the Faith, we are always learning, always in process, always on a journey and need to be alert and praying in our discipleship. *“Watch yourselves, Stay awake, praying at all times.”*

Again St. Paul is writing to people who like most of us here are fully initiated into the faith and yet he talks about God *“increasing”* their love and urges them to *“make more and more progress in the kind of life that you are meant to live.”* All of us have the capacity to grow, to develop, to change, to make progress. We have not yet arrived at our destination even though we are well on the way.

If we stop and think for a moment and reflect on our faith as an encounter, a relationship with

God in Christ, then we realise that like all relationships it changes and develops over the years, and needs nurturing over time.

I do not relate to my mother, sister, niece the same way as I did 5, 10, 20 or more years ago. All our relationships with life-long partners, with long term friends change and grow as the years go by. Like us, hopefully they mature.

So also with that relationship which is our faith. I do not pray in the same way as I did 50, 40, 30, 20 10 years ago. I use the same words in the formal prayers that we use – but the prayer itself is different, because I am different.

“Learn to know and to follow Christ”

These are words spoken to our catechumens, as they are called, this morning. But they are a call to all of us as we begin a New Year in the life of the Church – for all of us to make use of the opportunities we have to grow and develop in our faith, to pray for our catechumens, and to pray for each other as we all take the next steps in this great journey of ours.

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT 2009

(Here is an example of how a news item caught my attention in the week leading up to this homily. Perhaps the story is too long? Judge for yourselves. Certainly it could only have worked in that week.)

An item of news has exercised my mind ever since I read about it earlier in the week. A young Flemish man called Ron Houben was involved in a terrible car crash with some friends on a Saturday night. He received severe injuries and was in a coma for a long period. He came out of the coma but was in what is called “*a neuro-vegetative state*”. The doctors could detect no brain response to any stimulus at all. He was, in their view brain dead.

His mother would have none of it. She, along with her husband and Ron’s older sister, were convinced that Ron knew what was going on, but they had no evidence to show that this was the case. When Ron’s father became very ill Ron had to be placed in a care home to be looked after. His father died. His mother told him all this – with no response. On a number of occasions she tried contacting doctors in different countries – even raising the money to take Ron to different neurology centres in Germany and the United States. Then with some new technology one doctor back in Belgium found that there was some response going on deep in Ron’s brain. They managed to hook up a computer and pad to decode any response he might have. When they tipped his bed forward a bit and with his whole body trying to respond – with his foot he managed to come up with the sentence “*I am Ron*”.

This happened relatively recently and it was **23 years** since the car crash – 23 years. In the next little while and with the help of technology he was able to tell his mother and the doctors that he knew everything that was going on but couldn’t respond. He knew his father was dead because his mother had told him.

I just cannot get my head round what it must have been like to live for 23 years with the frustration of not being able to reach out to anyone else – to the mother, to the doctors, or carers – “*that water is too hot.*” “*You’re being too rough – that hurts.*” “*Thank you for that word of kindness*” – Nothing. I just cannot get my head round what it must have been like for Ron all those years – and the feeling of liberation that must have come in simply being able to communicate to someone else, “*I am Ron*”.

Now, why do I dwell on this story this weekend? For sure it has ethical implications for the treatment of severely injured people and a number of cases across the world are being re-assessed with the help of the new technology available – but there is much more to this.

There is the attempt to empathise with Ron’s incredible frustration and liberation. Then there is the model of the mother’s persistence and love over all those years. Without in any way meaning to be glib about this I see here an image – a metaphor – for God’s persistence and love for me, for us, for the whole of humanity – for 50-odd years up to now, for thousands of years, up to now.

Today we begin a New Year in the liturgical life of the church and we are reminded once again in our Readings of God’s persistence and love for his Chosen People two and half thousand years ago in Jeremiah’s time – offering them hope – a way of getting out of what was ultimately a self-imposed imprisonment in sin and selfishness. We hear similar hope offered by Jesus and then St. Paul 2000 years ago not just to people then, but to us now.

God’s love is so persistent with us that it will never fail. Perhaps if we could begin to imagine the joy of Ron’s mother to hearing her son’s words, “*I am Ron*” after her persistence and love, we might begin to gain an insight into the joy God feels when God’s persistence and love move us to say a simple “*Yes, I believe.*”

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT 2012

(A perennial problem at the beginning of Advent is the fact that the rest of society is already celebrating Christmas with great gusto, with no thought to any spiritual preparations.)

As far as the rest of society is concerned we are now already celebrating Christmas. The season of parties, fayres, dos of one kind or another, dedicated TV channels on cable and satellite, and so on. To offer any reservations about this it to invite criticism of either trying to be like King Canute and stop the tide inevitably rolling in, or else to belong to the Ebenezer Scrooge Bah-Humbug school of thought about Christmas celebrations. So let’s be clear on this First Sunday of Advent and the beginning of a New Year in the liturgical life of the Church about a few things.

Firstly, we live in the world **as it is**. The whole point of Jesus’ being a human person was to help us rooted in this world to live good and holy lives. Christianity is not about living in a ghetto or cocoon fenced off from the rest of the world. **But** that does not mean that we accept everything going on around us uncritically. We are called to discern, with the help of the Spirit, what is good and right and holy, and what is not.

Secondly, **of course** we celebrate the coming of Christ among us, as one of us. It is the Second greatest Feast of the Christian Year. And like the greatest feast of that year – the commemoration of Jesus' Death and Resurrection, we need to prepare ourselves to celebrate properly. Advent is a time when we **prepare** to celebrate.

In this first part of Advent we are reminded in our Readings and Prayers at Mass that ultimately we are preparing to meet Jesus at his Second Coming – that's why our Readings still talk about the coming of the Son of Man at the end of time. We live now, in this world as it is, knowing that the goal and meaning of this life comes afterwards.

And the key to this is" the call to live our faith with awareness, deliberately, actively – **intentionally**. This is what that call in the Gospel today is about, *“Stay awake, praying at all times....to stand with confidence before the Son of Man.”* That is the message of the Gospel – the message St. Paul gives in our Second Reading, *“... make more and more progress in the kind of life you are meant to live : the life that God wants.”*

At one time holiness – living the life God wants of us – was thought of as something really belonging to priests and religious. The rest of society, the rest of the Church, was thought to struggle barely keeping themselves from wallowing in the depths of sinfulness – saved only by frequent confession and Mass- going. But then a different way rooted in the message of the Gospel was given by the Fathers at Vatican II.

They decided to dedicate a whole chapter of their reflections on the Church to the **“Universal call to Holiness”** rooted in the double commandment of loving God and loving neighbours as ourselves the Bishops wrote,

“By our holy love, we nurture in the world a way of life that is more gentle, more beautiful, more human.”

There is enough brutality, ugliness and inhumanity around in the world and Jesus' coming was about bringing true gentleness, beauty and humanity into the world. The Bishops go on to point out that in the Gospels this is brought about by, *“a heart of mercy, humility, meekness, patience, awareness of God's mercy when we have sinned, and a spirit of forgiveness towards others.”*

This is what our Christmas preparations are all about.

The basis of true and meaningful celebration.

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT 2015

This week on the front page of our newsletter you will find an extract from one of the most extraordinary pieces of writing I have seen this year, or am ever likely to see. Antoine Leiris' wife was one of those shot dead at the Bataclan Theatre in Paris two weeks ago. It was something he first posted on Facebook that then went “viral”. It has been reprinted in newspapers in London, New York, Sydney, Delhi and Cape Town, and that is only a sample of the English language newspapers. I have no idea how many newspapers in other languages have carried it. It is usually referred to as, “I do not give you the gift of my hatred”. It is addressed to his wife's killers.

Here is a relatively young man who is, as he writes, “devastated with grief” at the loss of his wife - “the love of my life”, as he calls her. I do not know what kind of believer he is (Christian, Jewish, Buddhist or whatever) but he clearly believes in some kind of God when he writes, “If this God for which you kill indiscriminately made us in his own image, every bullet in the body of my wife will have been a wound in his heart.” What a powerful piece of imagery! “a wound in his heart”, in other words “a blasphemy”, something totally alien and contradictory to whatever God is.

He goes on to talk about his 17 month old son, “We are two, my son and I, but we are stronger than all the armies in the world... I don’t have any more time to devote to you. I have to join Melvil who is waking up from his nap... He will eat his meals as usual, and then we are going to play as usual, and for his whole life this little boy will threaten you by being happy and free. Because no, you will not have his hatred either.”

I cannot think of a more pertinent example of someone putting our Readings of today into practice, whether he is a Christian or not it does not matter. St Paul urges his audience “to make more and more progress in the kind of life you are meant to live, the life God wants...” That is a life of love, a love expressed in our everyday actions and interactions. The prophet Jeremiah puts it in a rather different way but with the same ultimate effect. Having suffered from evil, lying and dishonest kings for a long time, he is promising the people of Israel – currently in Exile in Babylon – someone who will “practice honesty and integrity in the land.” That response of Antoine Leiris to his wife’s murder is one of love, of complete honesty and integrity.

Jesus, in our Gospel, is concerned about the suddenness of the End (with a capital ‘E’ – the end of this world as we know it), and his basic message is to live the Gospel in such a way that, whenever the time comes, we might be able “to stand with confidence before the Son of Man.” To be able to stand before God as people of honesty, integrity, as people who have tried to love as Jesus has commanded us. This is our goal in life – a goal which we remember especially as we begin a New Year in the life of the Church, and be renewed in our own commitment to that life.

Currently we have the incredible example of a young widower writing in pain and grief, but clearly also with an inner strength that can only come from a love deep in his being, from where he can say, “I don’t give the gift of hating you. You are asking for it but responding to hatred with anger would be giving in to the same ignorance that made you what you are.” Love is stronger than that, always!

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT 2018

This passed week I have been in Rome as part of a group of priests from this country who have celebrated 40, 50 or 60 years of ministry. In total there were 42 of us and altogether we had clocked up 1,970 years in the priesthood! The highlight of the week was going to the Papal Audience on Wednesday, but not for the reason you might be thinking. What happened during the audience has gone viral on YouTube and news websites around the world.

Everything is done in a total of 8 languages, so you can imagine how long the process takes – even

though the Pope does not speak for too long. As the English interpretation was coming to an end a young boy of 7 got away from the front barrier, walked up the steps to the platform on which the Pope was sitting, completely ignored the Pope himself and went to play with one of the Swiss Guards stood to attention in all of his finery at the side of the stage. The boy examined his gold, red and blue pantaloons and tried to hold the guards glove hand down at his side. The child's mother was brought forward and introduced her son to the Pope, who apparently said to her, "Let him play up here if he wants to." The translations went on and finally the boy finished his playtime and went back down the steps to his mother. At this point the Pope said off-the-cuff, "This boy cannot speak (he is, in fact, autistic). He is mute. But he knows how to communicate. He is free – in an undisciplined kind of way, yes – but free. And it made me think, 'Am I free before God?'"

"Am I free before God?"

Here, I believe, is a link to our Readings this Sunday.

As I said in the introduction to Mass today we celebrate endings and beginnings: an old year in the life of the Church has ended and a new one has started. Our Readings actually look forward to another ending and beginning: the end of this world and the coming of the Son of Man (Jesus) to herald the Kingdom of Heaven. There is an urgency about them because they were all written at times of great peril for people suffering either exile or persecution. They are a call to be vigilant, to be prepared for the Lord's coming at any moment. Such watchfulness is not easy to sustain for any of us, but it is the Second Reading that points to what all of this concentration on following the ways of Jesus is about.

"... we urge you and appeal to you in the Lord Jesus to make more and more progress in the kind of life that you are meant to live: the life that God wants."

Now there are many ways of expressing what God wants for us and an important one in the writings of St Paul is freedom: freedom from slavery to sin and death. Remember the Pope's question, "Am I free before God?" The freedom illustrated by that young lad was of playfulness and joy, which can be disciplined as well as undisciplined. This is surely the kind of freedom God wants for us – not some dour, po-faced, grim looks on our faces and in our lives as we struggle to live this Gospel message of ours. It is, after all, a message of hope, of joy.

Perhaps, instead of the usual New Year Resolutions people often make, quite simply we could have a question instead, a question that we might keep re-visiting from time to time. "Am I free before God?" If the answer is "No", we need to be looking into whatever is keeping us back, preventing us from being free before our God. What am I afraid that God might see? That is a very silly idea since God sees everything, and no matter what we do all God wants is for us to ask for forgiveness and mercy.

"Am I free before God?" If not, why not?

YEAR C – SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Bar. 5:1-9

Phil. 1:4-6, 8-11

Lk. 3:1-6

This Sunday John the Baptist makes his first appearance and for St Luke this is at a very precise moment in history.

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT 2003

(This Sunday is Bible Sunday across the Christian denominations and in the parish that year we were offering Prayer Place leaflets to help people get to know the readings each week.)

Sometimes the answers to our questions and our problems come from the most unexpected quarters. It may be that we have been physically looking all over the place for something, only for it to turn up in the last place you would expect it to. Or else perhaps we have been wrestling with a problem wracking our brains to know who to turn to or what to do and the answer comes from the most unexpected – even the most unpromising person. There is a sense in which our whole faith is based on this unlikeliness, unexpectedness – you would hardly expect hope and salvation to come in the shape of a Cross – an instrument of death, but that is precisely what lies at the heart of our faith.

This unexpectedness is also evident in our Readings today. Hope in spite of Exile, Joy in spite of imprisonment, and Good News in spite of tyranny.

The section of the Prophet Baruch in our First Reading has obvious echoes with some of the writings of the greatest of the prophets Isaiah – the hills flattened, the valleys filled in to make it easier for people to return to Jerusalem. In the midst of miserable Exile, with the Jewish people now scattered to the four winds in the Diaspora – a coming back together from East and West – a joyous gathering together once again under the protection of their God – is promised by the prophet. Hope in spite of Exile.

St. Paul is praying with joy for the people of Philippi from his prison cell. Incarcerated for preaching the Risen Christ, Paul is happy within himself because he has been doing and is still doing the right thing – offering encouragement and hope to all and especially to those who need it most. Joy in spite of imprisonment.

Then there is that Gospel Reading – very solemn and stentorian – placing the ministry of John the Baptist and of Jesus at a very precise moment in history- but not the most promising moment. For those first hearers of Luke's Gospel the news of Tiberius Caesar, Herod, Pontius Pilate, Annas and Caiaphas images of tyranny, oppression and persecution would come to mind. When people like this are about and in charge you would not expect there to be much **Good News** around – and yet it is precisely in such dark times that Good News does appear – first with John the Baptist and secondly with Jesus. Good News in spite of tyranny.

Our Scriptures are full of words of hope, joy and Good News – sometimes in the most unexpected places – but we will never come across them, never find it we never open the

Scriptures for ourselves. I'm not talking here about a random dip into the Bible – Bible Roulette – looking for an answer to a particular problem, or a message to help us in our difficulties. I remember talking to someone who said he'd tried this Bible version of Roulette on only two occasions. On the first his Bible opened up at the blank page between the Old and New Testaments – and the other occasion he happened on the passage in the Book of Samuel where Saul fell on his sword and killed himself – not the most helpful of exercises. No, what we are looking for having is a substantial read – along with guides like the Prayer Place leaflets and a reflection reading of St. Luke's Gospel – answers in unexpected places.

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT 2006

I think that we are all familiar with the three great gifts of God known as the virtues of Faith, Hope and Love. Faith is our trust and belief in God. Love is God's utter selflessness in addressing the needs of others which we are empowered to imitate. These we know and are familiar with – but that middle one – HOPE – is one that we often muddle up, and yet it is one of the great themes of our Advent journey.

One of the problems we have is because of our ordinary use of the word. We hope it won't be a harsh winter. We hope that our team will do well. We hope that the traffic won't be too bad on our way to work in the morning. Hope in these uses is built on so many variables and uncertainties beyond our control.

If we then transfer that use of the word hope to our faith – we hope for our salvation, it is in danger of becoming something rather fragile, uncertain and unreal. But Christian hope is rather different. It is based in reality and built on certainty.

The reality of our hope is seen in today's Gospel. St. Luke takes great pains to set Jesus' Public Ministry in real time. These things happened in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, these were the local rulers at the time, and these were the religious leaders. This is concrete fact, he is saying. These things happened and we can be certain of them. Our faith, our hope is based in reality.

Christian hope is also certain because it is not based on all sorts of variables beyond our control. It is based rather on God and what God has done for us in Christ. We are preparing to celebrate the beginnings of all this in our Advent Season.

Our hope of salvation is certain and it is real because it is based in what God has done for us in Christ at a particular time. The uncertainty is only on our side of the equation and how we respond to this gift of hope – at one extreme despairing that we could ever be part of this great plan of God's, or at the other extreme, presuming that no matter what we say or do we are saved.

To help shake us out of these false ways of thinking we are reminded in today's Gospel both that the message of hope and salvation is for all people.

“All humankind shall see the salvation of God.”

And that on our part we are invited to *“repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”*

Just as Christian hope is based on reality and certainty, we are invited to do the same in this Season of Advent:- to have a realistic look at ourselves to see where we are on life’s great journey of faith, and to place ourselves in the great certainty of God’s love and forgiveness for those who repent.

In doing this we really will be able to celebrate Christmas properly in a couple of weeks’ time.

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT 2009

In the same way that **we** are familiar with the story that unfolds in St. Luke’s Gospel, so also were those for whom he wrote it in the first place. They are already people of faith and what St Luke is doing is addressing these people with the story that lies at the centre of this faith. As he tells the story he puts down markers, reminders, to his audience about what is to come. So as soon as they hear the names of Herod, Pontius Pilate, Annas and Caiaphas they know where this story is leading – and so do we. Even though we know the story, our faith needs to be fed, to be reminded of what it is, of who it is, that makes our life meaningful and full of hope.

Two things stand out from that list of names in today’s Gospel:- the first is that in spite of all that Jesus will eventually suffer at the hands of these people, we know that he triumphs in the end – evil is overcome by goodness; Hope is already a theme. Secondly the list of names includes the precise year of the Emperor’s reign in which this story unfolds. So it reminds us that this is no spurious legend that St. Luke is describing. These events took place at a very precise moment in history and for St. Luke there is nothing more important in the whole history of the world than what he is beginning to tell in this passage. This is the centre of everything.

Right from the start we are reminded that the core message of faith is of the salvation of all humankind This is the hope given in John the Baptist’s preaching echoing the words from centuries earlier of the prophet Isaiah to the Exiles in Babylon looking forward to returning to their homeland – every conceivable obstacle that might hinder or block that return to the Promised Land is to be flattened and smoothed out to allow this passage home.

It is a theme taken up by the prophet Baruch in our First Reading. Baruch is not well known to us but he was a disciple of the prophet Jeremiah during the time of the Exile in Babylon – the very time that the people of Israel were being offered the hope of a joyful return home. Again the imagery points up the ease with which this will happen under the Lord’s protection. In contrast to when they were marched off under armed guard across the desert into exile the return, we hear, will be shaded by trees and smoothed out – no high mountains to climb or deep valleys to traverse. Their way will be guided by God in integrity, mercy and joy – sorrow and distress replaced by beauty and glory – images of the presence of God in the midst of life.

This presence of God in all things is what our Scriptures help us to see, to appreciate and to understand. This is what lies at the heart of the hope we celebrate especially in this Advent

Season. Jesus is coming and his will **will** be done.

In celebrating these events again in the weeks ahead we too become part of this story of salvation.

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT 2012

"These things actually happened." "They are still meaningful for us today." I think that those two statements explain the background to St. Luke's whole Gospel. This, of course, is not the only place where he roots events in a very specific moment in history. *"In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census of the whole world should be taken..."* This is the Gospel Reading that we use at the Midnight Mass at Christmas – Jesus' birth taking place at a very specific named moment in history. *"These things actually happened." "They are still meaningful, relevant for us today."* Jesus' Birth, John the Baptist's preaching, Jesus' whole life, death and resurrection happened and St. Luke's tells his readers about these events because they are capable of touching the lives of everyone, at all times.

The relevance and meaning of these events for us today lie in God's constant approach to us, God's coming into our lives to offer them meaning, direction and hope in the midst of an often bewildering life.

Even though the Jewish people had largely turned their backs on God, and their covenant with God, in the years prior to the Fall of Jerusalem and the terrible Exile in Babylon, nevertheless the prophet Baruch in our First Reading tells the people that their time of sorrow and distress is over and that God is going to lead them back here. Notice how the journey is made as smooth and as easy as possible with the flattening of mountains, the filling in of valleys, and trees to shade their path from the relentless heat of the sun.

The same message of hope is offered by St. Paul in that Second Reading when he tells the people of his joy at all they are doing and urges their love to increase, their knowledge to improve, and their perception to deepen – and all this so that they can recognize what is best for them in life.

It is the same message of hope and the ease with which God wants to make our journey of faith that lies behind the call of the Baptist in our Gospel

In truth, of course, things happen to us in life which we find very bewildering, *"Why is this happening to me/to my loved ones?" "What have I done to deserve this?"* Natural questions that face us at different points in life. In the short view it can seem that this hope, this support if fanciful – that happens, but it is in the long view that we best appreciate God's help and support on our journey. And it is looking into that overall journey that we are invited to look and reflect today in this period of Advent as we prepare for the Lord's coming – the better to be able to see God's presence in all things and at every moment of life's journey, including, and perhaps especially at the difficult times.

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT 2018

That is a very solemn, I am almost tempted to say, 'pompous', opening to our Gospel today. "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar..." Actually it is meant by St Luke to be a solemn opening to something very special indeed. He is saying, in effect, "Listen folks! What I am about to describe here is no myth, no fairy-tale, not 'fake news' (in the current phrase). This is for real and it happened at this particular time in history." Not only that, St Luke holds the view that there is nothing more important in the whole of human history than the birth, life, death and resurrection of the central character of his narrative – Jesus Christ. No wonder he is being so solemn here, as indeed he is at other times in his Gospel.

There is nothing more important in the whole of human history than the events he goes on to narrate in his Gospel. That is a huge claim to make... but it is actually the same claim that we make by being here, by reciting our Creed, and so on. Perhaps it is an idea to step back from all the frenetic activity of these next few weeks to remind ourselves of this. Our faith is rooted in actual events – events that changed everything, for everyone – the earliest of which we are preparing to celebrate in this Advent Season.

It is a time of waiting, a time of penitence with our purple vestments and lack of flowers decorating the altar for sure, but it is also definitely one of anticipated joy and hope. Both John the Baptist and the prophet Baruch point to the hope offered to a beleaguered people and how easy it will be for these people to be released from whatever holds them back. Valleys will be filled in, mountains levelled, and shade from the burning sun will be given to those travelling by a canopy of fragrant trees. For Baruch the people he is writing about were the Jewish Exiles in Babylon who were dragged off in chains as captives, but they are going to return carried back like "royal princes". For John the Baptist the freedom he is talking about is freedom from the slavery to sin and selfishness, the same freedom that Jesus will talk about and bring about in his life, death and resurrection.

What is clear from both of those Readings is the ease with which people will be able to take hold of this freedom, this liberation. All obstacles will be removed. Sadly, at times when it came to basing a whole religious infrastructure on this core idea, obstacles and hurdles were often put in people's ways. Many of these were purely artificial, and they had the effect of obscuring the central message of the Gospel – of hope, of liberation, of mercy – and becoming instead a set of rigid rules and regulations to be scrupulously observed at every turn, or else... or else. The threat was often implied, sometimes openly expressed: hell-fire and damnation.

At times, in different ages, that approach seemed to bring in the crowds cowered and scared by the images of what might happen to them if they did not comply to all of these rules and regulations. It was a religion based not on hope, love and mercy, but on fear. It was a dead-end because it was not properly rooted in the message of Luke's Gospel, or any of the other Gospels either.

What we see in and preach from our Gospels today is sometimes criticised as soft and far too easy-going. To be honest if the message seems soft and easy-going we are indeed missing something. In fact the message is rooted both in the reality of a particular set of events – some of which are joyful and happy, whereas others are terrible and tragic – and in the messiness of our

lives here and now. It is not so much soft and easy-going as a message of hope to people whose lives can seem confusing, even overwhelming at times. It is a message of hope, not a forlorn hope rooted in all kinds of variables that we come across in life which are beyond our control, but real hope based on what Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection have brought about: our freedom.

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Zeph. 3:14-18

Phil. 4:4-6, 8-11

Lk. 3:10-18

In the old calendar this was known as "Gaudete Sunday" – "Rejoicing Sunday" – from the opening word of the introit. The homilies mainly reflect the need to be on the lookout for what brings true, lasting joy, as opposed to quick-fixes. One of them is, however, somewhat different because of circumstances... This is something which can happen in pastoral ministry at any time.

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT 2003

Apparently one of the books predicted to be at the top of the best seller's lists this Christmas is a book about punctuation. It seems to be full of examples of how a comma added here or an apostrophe missed there changes the meaning of phrases in the most bizarre way. There's a T-shirt advertising the book – on the front is the sentence "A woman, without her man, is nothing" – with a slight change of punctuation the book reads, "A woman: without her, man is nothing."

Changes of meaning can also occur in faith matters – simply due to a comma. A friend of mine is waging a campaign in her local parish for a comma in the Creed that we recite after the homily. We tend to say, "We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth of all that is seen and unseen." What the Creed actually says is "We believe in one God, the Father the Almighty maker of heaven and earth of all that is, seen and unseen." There is a subtle difference between these two ways of expressing faith. The history of the church is littered with misunderstandings that have come about because of simple mistakes in copying things done. Such things kept me in employment teaching theology and church history for years!

Mistakes can also come about when the wrong image comes to mind with certain words – as in today's Gospel. When we hear John the Baptist talking about "*chaff being burned up in a fire that will never go out*" the image that came to my mind for a long time was the so-called fire of hell. The good grain goes into the safety of the barn while the useless chaff is burned in hell – but that image is actually wrong.

St. Luke has John the Baptist talk about someone coming after him who is greater than him – obviously Jesus. This person is to baptise with '**the Holy Spirit and fire**'. The fire he is

talking about is the fire that Christ brings into our lives in and through our Baptism.

We are well used to the image of the waters of Baptism cleansing and bringing new life, but baptism also brings with it the fire of the Holy Spirit – which likewise has two sides to it. Just as water both cleanses and gives new life, so fire both **'fires up/strengthens'** and burns away. It burns away the chaff that remains in our lives as we journey in faith towards God's Kingdom.

Advent, as a time of preparation, is an opportunity to look for the useless chaff in our lives – all those things that hold us back from being fully ourselves before God and with each other. No-one should underestimate how difficult, and at times how painful, such a process is. At various times in our lives we will have some very difficult chaff to confront and have burnt away – but the symbol of fire here is not of punishment but of refining and purifying/cleansing.

We are continuing here the Advent theme of Hope – of the certainty that God's will, will prevail – and that's why the other Readings and prayers at this Liturgy talk of happiness and rejoicing. Our readiness and ability to welcome the coming of the Saviour into the world will vary according to how much chaff we are ready to confront and to have burnt away.

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT 2006

Ten days ago amongst the various breads for sale at Aldi opposite the Galleries I noticed that they were already selling Hot Cross Buns! I suppose that shouldn't come as a surprise. It must be about ten years ago now that the son of friends of mine arrived home from his shelf-stacking job on Christmas Eve, unwrapped something and was asked 'what's that?' *"Oh it's a Cadbury's Crème Egg. We've just been putting them on the shelves for when we open after Boxing Day."*

Our culture has lost all sense of Seasonality, if that is a word. If we want fresh strawberries at Christmas we have them flown from California. If we want salad at this time of year we demand that it is flown in from Kenya – no matter how much water – needed to irrigate local food crops for native Kenyans – is diverted to grow food for our wants/demands, not our needs. Because people seem to be celebrating Christmas from the day after Bonfire Night, no wonder we are right royally fed up of Christmas before it even starts. But the celebrations are very superficial – they have no depth, because they are not rooted in the core of what Christmas is truly about. They are not rooted **seasonally**.

We have the Season of Advent to give us the proper roots for a real deep and meaningful celebration of Christmas. Which is, of course, exactly what we are not supposed to do – because superficial living, not asking awkward questions about justice, and about meaning, is exactly how a secular, capitalist culture thrives.

But in Advent we have been busy building the foundations for a proper, meaningful celebration – WHEN IT COMES, not before. In the first week we heard the theme of waiting/watching. In the

second week we had the theme of hope, realising that despite all signs to the contrary, God is at work in the world. In the final few days (and this year because Christmas is on a Monday, we only have a 3-week Advent and we are almost on to those last days) we build up the story of the Annunciation to Elizabeth and to Mary, the Visitation, and the births of John the Baptist and then Jesus. But before that, on this 3rd Sunday we are offered the theme of Joy, of rejoicing.

Rejoicing in the expectation and hope we have been hearing about up to now – a joy that embraces awkward and disturbing questions – like John the Baptist there in our Gospel. Rejoicing is not about getting more, acquiring more, having more. It is about rejoicing in having our true needs satisfied and seeing that the needs of others are satisfied too.

If you have two tunics (if you have two of anything and actually only need one) share with the person who has none. Tax collectors? OK, so your jobs may not be the best paid in the world – but you have a job, you can put bread on the table every day, what about the person who hasn't and can't? Soldiers working for Herod? OK, so one of your supposed perks is to shake down the odd person or two to get a bit extra into your pocket – but what about these people? How do they feel when you do this to them?

Christmas **is** about rejoicing, present-giving, feasting – for the right reasons. Because our celebrations are rooted in our belief that Jesus' birth, the birth of the Son of God, the Son of Man, is the greatest Good News we could imagine – but it takes time to build up to such a celebration – it takes a season – to savour it and enjoy it because the enjoyment we get from this celebration is meant to last, and last and last.

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT 2009

The sentence, *“What must we do?”* comes across rather like a mantra in the first part of that Gospel Reading – first the people, then the tax collectors, finally the soldiers. It is a reminder to us at a time when we are invited to be reflective – to reflect on the meaning and purpose of the events surrounding Christmas – that our faith is also a call to action.

Fr. Richard Rohr is a well-known American Franciscan priest who over 20 years ago founded a study centre for Action and Contemplation. Whenever he is asked, *“Which is the more important word in the title of the Centre – action or contemplation?”* his response is *“Actually the most important word in the title is **AND** – action **and** contemplation.”* Working for justice and peace in the world comes out of a solid basis in faithful prayer. They are rooted in each other.

John the Baptist has called the people to prayerful repentance and now, after they have received his baptism of repentance the natural question that follows is, *“OK, so now what must we do?”* In a sense the answers that he gives the three groups are rather disappointing. They are disappointing because there is nothing particularly earth-shattering in what he says to the crowd. It is all really rather obvious. *“What must we do?”* *“Well, what do you think you should do – if you have more than you need for yourself – share what's left over with those who need it?”* To the tax collectors, *“Be content with your basic lot – don't go in for cheating!”* To the soldiers, *“You're fed and clothed – don't abuse your power to bully people!”* I think that many in all three groups left

John the Baptist somewhat disappointed.

I suspect that if we were to ask the question, “*What must we do?*” deep down in our heart of hearts we too really know what we should be doing most of the time. It is inertia, sloth, lack of purpose that keeps us from doing what we need to do. One of the key elements in our confession of sin at the beginning of Mass is “*in what I have failed to do.*”

You know in the early centuries of the Christ-Church for the most part people were attracted to the community not so much by the truth or logic of the teaching that they proclaimed. Much more they were attracted by the manner in which the members of the community lived their lives. There was something really attractive about the honesty of their lives, about the way they cared for others in need, about how principled these people who called themselves “*Christians*” were in their dealings with others.

Action and Contemplation.

In these days of final preparations before celebrating Christmas we are invited to take some time to reflect on the real meaning and purpose of the celebrations **and** to become involved or more involved, in actions that give outward expression to our faith. Just like the three groups in the Gospel we too probably already know the answer to the question, “*What must we do?*”

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT 2012

(Events in the run up to writing this homily – both on the news and at a more personal level – made for a rather different homily this year. Sometimes trying to give more than this is simply not possible – and people in a congregation know this.)

I think it must have been the news on Friday night from Newtown in Connecticut – about the latest gun massacre at a school in the U.S.A. that was the straw that broke the camel’s back, but I have found it very difficult to come to grips with readings which older people to, “*Shout for joy, daughter of Zion! Exalt! Rejoice!*” Even St. Paul’s wish for the people he is writing to, “*I want you to be happy, always happy in the Lord.*” They sound a bit hollow today.

Aside from news of gun massacres in the USA, other world news is none too encouraging about unrest and violence in the Middle East and Africa. Closer to home news of illnesses and deaths among family, friends and parishioners is a kind of backdrop to it all.

Hope, that virtue which tells us that God is present and is at work even and especially in the darkest times in spite of all signs to the contrary – seems difficult to latch on to. There are certainly no glib answers that will wave a magic wand and make everything right again.

And that’s the point of our faith and our hope. It’s not about a piece of magic. It’s about a sense of perspective, a sense of meaning in the midst of reality. Not taking us out of that reality, but helping us to live through it – aware that somewhere in the midst of it all the Risen Christ really **is** with us as we continue to journey in these dark days trying to sense the light of Christ’s coming into the world. And particularly at this time we pray **together** and for each other as we continue

our faith journey in some trying times.

Leading somehow to the Peace of Christ which is beyond all understanding.

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT 2015

Many people seem to be under the misapprehension that the Christian Faith is first and foremost either a system of beliefs, or a set of moral rules, or else a combination of both. This is a misapprehension. It is a mistaken view of the Christian Faith.

Our faith is, in fact, first and foremost a relationship, a meeting, an encounter with God in and through the person of Jesus Christ. We meet this person who is at the heart of our faith in many different ways – in our reading of the Scriptures at Mass and at home, in the Eucharist and in other sacraments when we celebrate them, in our own private prayer, and in our encounters with others who bear the imprint of Christ in their own persons, just as we do. We are Christ to others, not just here at Mass but in everything we do, especially in the example of living that we give to others.

It is in that example of living that a code of behaviour, a set of moral rules, does become evident, as do certain beliefs about Jesus and what he reveals about God, as we recite them in our Creed at Mass. Relationship comes first and, as a result of that relationship certain beliefs and a code of behaviour follow.

We witness this way of things in our day-to-day relationships, especially in our relationships with those closest to us. As we get to know someone, and want to get to know that person better and better, our understanding of them grows as we talk with them and see how they behave. In the most intimate of relationships our behaviour begins to match that of our loved one so that the relationship is able to grow and to strengthen. We come to know that certain ways of behaving enhance and strengthen that relationship, while other ways of behaving weaken it, and in some extreme cases can even put its very existence under threat.

In a religious context we call threats to our relationship “SIN” – with some sins being more grave than others. In contrast any behaviour that enhances and strengthens a relationship we call “VIRTUOUS”.

This is what John the Baptist is pointing to in his preaching in today’s Gospel. A combination of an ‘air of expectancy’ about something momentous about to happen and his own reputation as a preacher of some note, means that huge crowds come to listen to him. They come forward for a baptism (not, of course, here the Sacrament of Baptism which Jesus will give some time later), rather a rite of cleansing in which they ask forgiveness of God and promise to try their best to follow God’s ways more closely in their lives.

Consequences follow from their relationship with God through the Covenant with Moses (the Law as it is called). Here John the Baptist highlights acting justly with those around – looking out to help those in need, no cheating, no extortion, no intimidation of others. Consequences follow

from our relationship with Jesus, and our belief that in him sin is forgiven and we are made free of slavery to sin.

In Advent, especially as we get closer to Christmas we are invited to reflect on our current behaviour – towards God, towards others, and within ourselves. We are invited to repent of any wrongdoing and to ask for and to receive God’s mercy and forgiveness – in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, in our prayers at Mass, and so on. In doing this we acknowledge our wish to strengthen the relationship which is the very heart of our faith and which we do with great joy at this time of year when we welcome the newborn Jesus into our world, and into our own lives, once again.

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT 2018

At this time of year it seems as though every newspaper, magazine and mainstream tv station is running a Christmas appeal for one good cause or another. My copy of The Tablet (church magazine) had no fewer than four appeals inside the wrapper this week, and that was before I opened the magazine itself to find further appeals inside. Christmas is traditionally a time of giving to charities. As well as giving presents to family and friends people in this country are very generous in their giving, and not just at this time of year, but then many of us do have the means to be able to be generous. Giving to good causes is not solely a Christian thing by any means, of course, but it is something that is at the heart of the Christian Faith, as we can see from our Gospel this weekend.

John the Baptist had been haranguing the crowd about how wayward they had all been in not following God’s ways at all, and our Gospel opens with that question from the crowd, “What must we do?” John’s message of repentance is not solely about prayer and confession of sins, it is also about action as a result of the forgiveness received. This will be core to Jesus’ message also. It is quite likely that among the people for whom St Luke was writing his Gospel were some wealthy former pagan converts of St Paul who certainly had a tunic or two to spare, and extra food to share with those in need. Now those same words of Jesus are directed at us.

Over the last couple of Sundays in Advent we have seen how Jesus wants us to be free from slavish obsessions to anything that prevents us from being who we are called to become. Remember the question of Pope Francis that we reflected on, “Am I free before God?” We have seen how we have been given in Jesus both the example and means of the hope that his coming into the world brings about. Today our readings talk about happiness and joy, something that brings about what St Paul, in our Second Reading calls, “the peace that passes all understanding.” This is God’s dearest wish for all of us, but it is not something that will ever come about if we think our freedom is simply given us to choose to do anything we like, good or bad. True freedom, the freedom shown in Jesus’ life and which he wins for us as well, is the freedom from any constraints that hold us back from being able to do what is right.

Reaching out to any and all who are in need is basic to the Christian Faith which is about both prayer and action, the one follows on from the other and they are quite inseparable. Our prayer underpins everything that we are, who we are at the deepest core of our being, but if prayer does

not then flow naturally into action on behalf of others something is missing. We are called to be disciples, followers of Jesus, followers of his teaching which is clearly about prayer and action.

Next week, just a couple of days before Christmas, on the Fourth and final Sunday of Advent, our picture of faith will almost be completed as we turn our attention to Mary, Our Lady, the highest example of discipleship, but for now we simply recall that question of the Crowd, "What must we do?" And remember that John the Baptist's response applies equally to us... We are called to **do**... And in the doing we will find that "peace which is beyond all understanding."

YEAR C – FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Mic. 5:1-4

Heb. 10:5-10

Lk. 1:39-44

In these latter stages of Advent we are, finally, focussing on the First Coming of Jesus at Christmas. Because of the way our calendar works this Sunday could be a whole week away from the 25th December, or it could be Christmas Eve. Circumstances can dictate how one approaches a homily on such occasions. Perhaps the primary question is, "What are people likely to be able to hear today?", as opposed to, "What can I say today about these readings?"

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT 2003

There are many ways that you could summarise the events recorded in these first two chapters of St. Luke's Gospel – one of which might be, *"It's amazing what can happen when people say **Yes** to God."* All the stories around Jesus' birth – and especially those to do with Mary – are about saying "Yes" to God's will.

The most obvious example, of course, is at the Annunciation when Mary says to Gabriel, *"Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done unto me according to your word."* This 'Yes to God' is echoed in the sentences that follow these words – our Gospel of today – the Visitation and the Magnificat – Mary's Song of Praise.

Elizabeth recognizes that someone special has come to visit her – and the specialness is in two ways – *"Of all women you are the most blessed, blessed is the fruit of your womb";* then also, *"Blessed is she who believed the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled."* Mary is special because of her unique role as Mother of this child who is to be born – **the Lord** – and special because she has believed God's promise to her and said, "Yes". Whilst there is no possible way anyone could imitate the unique role of her Motherhood of Jesus, there is every reason why all of us could imitate the second role of discipleship – of saying Yes to God in our own lives. In fact, we are invited to do just that.

Later on in St. Luke's Gospel, when Jesus is preaching to the crowd we hear that a woman shouted out, *"Blessed is she who bore you and nursed you."* – an obvious reference to Mary's unique role. But Jesus widens the scope of the blessing by saying, *"Blessed rather are they who hear the word of God and keep it."* Mary is that as well.

A few years ago one of my former colleagues at Ushaw pointed out in a homily on Mary, “*You know we took the best player off the team and made her the team mascot.*” So much of the devotion to Mary that was around at one time took her beyond anything that could be imitated by we mere mortals that her example was beyond reach. Her uniqueness as Jesus’ Mother was sometimes emphasised to the detriment of her role as **disciple**. The first can’t be imitated in any way, shape or form, but the second is exactly what we are all called to – and Mary’s is the best example offered to us to imitate. Mary is not a mascot – a lucky charm. She is the best player and we have much to learn from her skill of being able to say, ‘**Yes**’ to God.

Here is a young teenager – growing into adulthood – taken by surprise at what is asked of her – but trusting in God and saying Yes – in spite of the great unknown that faced her, in spite of what people might say about her, but strong and determined to carry out God’s wishes – and because she did we are able in a few days’ time to celebrate the birth of the Saviour.

It’s amazing what can happen when people say Yes to God – Hope and Salvation are experienced in our world and that is only a start!

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT 2006

(In 2006 Christmas fell on a Monday, so the 4th Sunday of Advent was, in fact, Christmas Eve. Insofar as people came to Mass that morning, they would be coming again later that afternoon or the next morning. The brevity of the homily reflects this circumstance.)

St. Luke is a gifted story-teller and in this Second Chapter of his Gospel he is building up to the climax of Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem. He is a good story-teller because he doesn’t give too many details but rather he gives sufficient to engage the imagination of the listener and reader.

And engaging the imagination is key to the quality of our celebrations. The more we engage our imaginations with these stories, the more alive they become.

Take, for example, today’s story and just that simple detail at the beginning of that Gospel passage, *Mary set out and went as quickly as she could to a town in the hill country of Judah.*” A journey from here to York or perhaps as far as Doncaster – a couple of hours in the car, hop on a train or a bus. No, no, walk – for four days and sleep out in the open for four nights, and do the same three months later on the way back. No-one would do that journey alone in those days, and certainly not a young teenage woman. You would wait for a caravan heading that way and negotiate yourself to be part of a strong enough group that thieves and robbers would keep away from.

No mean journey for Mary.

In the verse before this setting out on her journey to meet Elizabeth she had just said to the

Angel, *"Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord, let what you have said be done to me."* Accepting in faith what God wants of her and now setting out in faith and trust to be there for her cousin in her need.

Faith is being, trusting and doing – and that is something we will hear more of as Luke tells us the rest of the story over these couple of days.

"Just engage your imagination with these stories and wonderful things will happen"

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT 2009

So much of life these days seems to be very complex and confusing. A prime example would be the Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen- disputes about the science behind Global Warming, disputes between what rich countries need to do – energy countries – and some countries whose very existence is threatened by rising sea-levels. These are very important issues at work – but everything seems so complex and, as I say, confusing!

In the meantime one newspaper's headline yesterday screamed *"Chaos Saturday"* - the chaos caused by so many people travelling, so many people going to shopping centres and city centres to 'do last minute shopping' – chaos and confusion.

It all sounds rather grim and depressing – with potential for rising anger and frustration.

Contrast this with the calm, the simplicity and the joy of that scene in our Gospel – the Visitation. And more important – the feelings of joy, hope and contentment that this scene offers us now, today.

Here we have two cousins – expectant mothers greeting each other with joy. We know one, Elizabeth, is rather old to be having a child, the other, Mary, is young. It could almost be a mother and a daughter meeting. Elizabeth recognises that Mary is *"Blessed"* – there is something very special about her at this time. In the previous scene in this Gospel Mary had accepted the situation outlined to her by the Angel. *"How can this come about?"* had been her one question. And, once reassured by Gabriel she accepts all this on trust, *"I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let what you have said be done to me."*

Mary's response was in contrast to that of Elizabeth's husband – Zechariah. When the angel told him what was to happen, **his** response was to say, *"How can I be certain of this? What proof will you give me?"* Proof would come, in due course, but in the meantime he is struck dumb – unable to communicate easily with those around him.

Mary, on the other hand, having accepted what was said to her on trust, on faith, is able to go easily beyond herself to share her good news with others – including her expectant cousin, Elizabeth. Here we see trust and faith leading to openness, simplicity and joy.

Joy will, of course, come to Zechariah when his son is born, but in the meantime communication

is frustrating and complicated – gestures to be interpreted, tablets to be written on with a piece of chalk.

Doubt, mistrust leading to unnecessary complexity and frustration and all that they bring – whether for Zechariah, Climate Change Negotiations or people scurrying about thinking that they **must** comply with all the commandments and directives of the commercial festive season. Meanwhile in the Gospel – simplicity, calm, serenity, peace and joy coming from faith, trust, acceptance of God's wishes. God's commands, as it were, for this season.

It seems perfectly clear what offers the more hopeful and joyful Christians.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT 2012

The only safe way for Mary to visit her cousin Elizabeth would have been to join one of the caravans which regularly made the journey between Galilee and Judaea and vice- versa. These caravans consisted of traders, pilgrims going up to Jerusalem to the Temple, or people like Mary going to visit a relative in need. There was safety in numbers, especially for a woman travelling on her own on a route that was notorious for bands of thieves. As you can see it is quite some undertaking this Visitation which is described in the Gospel rather innocuously in a few sentences.

In those days it was basically the only way that people could get in touch with each other. Just think of the contrast today!

First there came the letter and a regular postal service, then the telephone, then easier, cheaper and safer modes of transport, then much more recently mobile phones, text- messages, emails, Facebook, twitter accounts, skype and a whole host of other ways of keeping in touch. I know how much these modern means of communication are important, even vital for people restricted to their homes because of illness or infirmity, or to loved ones separated from each other in different parts of the world. Keeping in touch has never been easier.

At the same time, however, there are some downsides to all of this. Texting and other computer-related forms of communication can be very obsessive, even addictive. Just this weekend I read an account in one newspaper of how a mother and daughter had won a competition – the prize for which was to spend a day on the film set of their favourite TV drama – to see what was going on and to meet the stars. The mother thoroughly enjoyed the experience and the opportunity to talk animatedly with so many of the actors. By contrast the daughter – who also professed to enjoy the visit – spent the whole time, not in watching what was going on, or taking part in any of the conversations

– No, she spent the whole time texting her friends, telling them about who was there.

She was there – in one sense – and in another she wasn't there – she wasn't present to the experience.

In the story of the Visitation Mary was present to Elizabeth in every sense, in every way – and this is the whole point of Visitation – of visiting – being there, being present to and for each other. In

religious terms the Visitation shows that Faith is not merely believing something, or trusting someone, it is also **doing** something. In purely human terms it is not just about being physically in the presence of someone else, it is about our whole selves – body, mind and spirit – being there for each other.

Over the next few days of festivities we will make many visitations – some by moving from one place to another, some making contact electronically. No doubt some of the visits we do will be under sufferance, because we'd rather be doing something else, but being fully present is a vital part of human contact and human flourishing – in isolation, closed in on ourselves we shrivel and die.

I wonder if there is someone, someone very close by, who could use a visit from us in the next few days to help them in their loneliness and isolation. Visiting them is not only an act of human kindness, it is an act of faith.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT 2015

Two expectant mothers quite rightly take centre-stage in our Gospel this weekend. The men who dominate most of the Scriptures are absent from this meeting of the two cousins. Although Elizabeth has all the words in this passage, it is Mary who has the dominant role. She has centre-stage.

Elizabeth is spot on with her reference to Mary as “the mother of my Lord”. This is the very reason why Mary is honoured and kept in such great esteem by Christians. Here in this quite ordinary setting of a humble family home, without any adornments of extravagant clothing nor yet of a multitude of other, symbolic titles, quite simply here at the beginnings of our Christian Faith we have the ‘Mother of our Lord’. This is the reason why, over the centuries, church people would add all of these extras, but they all stem from this simple, but profound beginning with Elizabeth’s greeting.

Wherever Mary is she bears Christ to us – in a very visceral way in today’s Gospel, then as the mother of a young child, then very tragically holding the lifeless body of her Son brought down from the Cross, and always since then by her example of faith and trust in her Lord.

“Blessed is she who believed the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled,” says Elizabeth. Once again she goes straight to the heart of the matter. Mary is not honoured by us simply because of a biological fact, but because of her example of faith. Hers is the supreme example of faith for us – the first, the best and the greatest disciple of Jesus. We learn from her how to say “Yes” to God’s will for us, and she helps us in that through her prayers with and for us.

Because she takes Christ with her wherever she goes, Mary also shows us a very simple truth about evangelisation. Evangelisation is about sharing the Gospel with others, and we, like Mary, through our baptism, are bearers of Christ to others. We are people who can share God’s Good News with others.

On Wednesday afternoon here in church Mr Fallon, the head teacher, introduced the Key Stage 2 Carol Service. He talked about going, belatedly as usual, to Tesco's at Kingston Park in search of an Advent Calendar for home. The shelves had been well raided by then and only a few remained. They happened, of course, to be religious ones, much to the disgust of two women whom he overheard complaining, "Ugh, this is hopeless there are only ones with that Jesus-thing on them, nothing left of the Fairy Queen or Frozen."!!! So much for what the Christmas Story is actually about, but it sums up the situation in which we find ourselves today – surrounded by a complete ignorance of the Good News, and a consequent inability to celebrate the coming Feast with any depth of joy and meaning.

We are able to celebrate with joy, knowing what this truly means for us and for all humankind. In Mary we have the best example of how, very simply, we can begin to live that message, and to pass it on in a world so bereft of the true Christmas Spirit.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT 2018

The plot of many a good story revolves around a message that is lost, misunderstood or which gets into the wrong hands. You find it as standard in thrillers, comedies and tragedies alike. A message left on an answer-machine is left unheard, a letter gets into the wrong hands, only part of a message gets through and leads people in all kinds of wrong directions. It is one of the great archetypal plots that have been around forever and a day. You can find in modern soap operas, classical operas, Shakespearian comedies and tragedies, ancient Greek plays, and so on. The thing is that for a message to succeed it needs both a messenger and someone who will be able to receive it and understand what needs to be done as a consequence.

In the early chapters of the Gospels of both St Matthew and St Luke it is perfectly clear that the central message is about Jesus – the same is true of the whole of each of the Gospels. These early chapters are rather special, however, because Jesus himself is not able to communicate his message for himself. More often than not it is an angel that is called upon to deliver it. That the message gets through, that it is received and understood, at least at a basic level is thanks to the recipients and the main recipient here in St Luke's Gospel is Mary – Our Lady.

In this story of the Visitation Elizabeth hits the mark when she says, "Blessed is she who believed the word spoken to her from the Lord would be fulfilled." Mary's acceptance of the message is absolutely critical to everything else. Because she trusts, because she believes, everything else can follow.

Clearly the news she receives from the Angel Gabriel is hugely life-changing - a young teenager, a virgin, is to have a child - but at the same time she is well prepared for this, in the sense that she has always been someone ready and willing to do the will of God, whatever it was that God asked of her in life. Unlike many of the later stories in the Gospels, this is not a story of conversion. Unlike Matthew, who leaves his customs post, or Zacchaeus who promises no longer to cheat people, Mary has nothing of which to repent. She has always done God's will and this step, though a massive one, is still in some ways simply another step on the path she is already taking.

Mary is offered in these events as what Pope Paul VI called 'the first and best disciple'. She shows throughout her life what true discipleship is about. Because she is always ready and willing to cooperate with God's grace, she will become, as Elizabeth describes her here as, 'the mother of my Lord'.

I said that Mary received the message 'at a basic level'. By that I mean that the full implication of what the message will bring about is not yet clear to her. In various places in these early chapters of St Luke's Gospel we hear that Mary, "pondered these things in her heart." A message, especially a message as profound and life-changing – life changing for all people, not just Mary herself – cannot be fully grasped in an instant. It takes time. It needs to be processed. Once again Mary is offered to us as the 'first and best' model of discipleship.

We, too, are called to treasure and ponder these things in our own hearts. After all, if the message is to work today it can only happen if the potential recipients of today follow Mary's example of openness and acceptance. Mary remains, not someone to be put on a pedestal and worshipped, rather she is someone to emulate and from whom, both in her example and in her prayers, we receive help when it comes to our turn to say, "Let it be done unto me according to your word."