



MEDITATIONS FOR ADVENT 1 by Father Robbie Low

1st Sunday of Advent - *Isaiah 63: 16-17; 64: 1, 3-8*

Please do not think that I am anti-Christmas. I am not Scrooge. But there are moments when I do get heartily fed up with the whole shebang. One such was the arrival of the first Christmas card this year – on All Saints' Day (1st Nov). So much thinking and preparation goes into the celebration of this determinative Christian festival that you might think that a priest would be delighted. But... the problem is that it is all too often the wrong sort of preparation. Indeed far from preparing for the Messiah of God it becomes a festival of idolatry, the worship of matter. Discussions are not about spiritual preparation for the revelation of the Glory of God but the choreographing of over-hyped materialistic desires with personal budgets. By teatime on the day the festive gathering is slumped before the idiot box surrounded by torn paper and a collection of stuff that will next emerge at a future parish fair.

There is little sense of hopes fulfilled, longings realised, expectations met in a way beyond our wildest imaginings.

And that is because we have almost entirely lost the great season of Advent. By putting us in touch with our past, the long and winding history of man in the path of the salvation of God, Advent prepares us, in our own day, to receive the glorious and magnificent mercy of God and

to grasp a glimpse of the beatific vision, not by 'following the fairies' of Marks and Spencer but by kneeling before the Babe in the arms of Mary. Listen to the cry of Isaiah, desperate for his people to return to faithfulness and for God to dwell in their midst as Redeemer and Father. *'Rorate coeli desuper et nubes pluant justum'* (Drop down ye heavens from above, and let the clouds rain down righteousness).

There is, in the prophetic call, a longing for the Kingdom of God. It is a longing based on a longstanding hope of the promises of God and a firm expectation of their fulfilment. And those are the three great undergirding features of Advent, longing, hope and expectation.

To understand these we, who live two thousand years after their fulfilment, have to stand again beside our brothers and sisters in the Faith and comprehend in heart and mind the tragedy of our situation, sinners marked for death, and the glorious redemption offered us in Christ.

We, who have no right to salvation, a mortal city besieged by time and condemned to ruin and dust, are offered not a temporary monarch and a happy life but rather a child born in poverty in a borrowed room. The wrapping is deceptive because this child is not just Man but God and the one in whose arms He rests is not just any mother but the Virgin, paradox upon paradox, whose immaculacy enables and whose assent allows the recreation of Man to dwell in eternity with God. She is the Portal of Salvation.

This is what Isaiah looks forward to. It is the climax of the longing of the faithful from Abraham on. So Isaiah goes on to acknowledge the reality of his peoples' situation. 'We are sinners. Unclean. Even our 'righteousness' is like filthy rags compared to God's holiness. We are withered, dried up, blown away like autumn leaves, by sin.

Advent then is a time to renew our longing for the kingdom and prepare ourselves anew for the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven to earth. That means facing up to the reality of our lives, our sinfulness, the emptiness and dryness and lifelessness of being at odds with the righteousness of God.

So the Sacrament of Reconciliation is God's gift to us here. It is the place of liberation and renewal. It is the place where we encounter the mercy of the Most High, where heaven does drop down by the ministry of the Holy Ghost and open our lives to the cleansing power of Christ's sacrificial love. (If you have forgotten how to make a good confession, come and ask. Because 'what is not offered cannot be healed', as St Gregory Nazianzus reminds us.)

Secondly, when we have done that, look at Isaiah's last sentence: 'We are the clay. You are the potter. We are the work of your hands.'

This is an image that goes back to the creation narrative and is powerfully employed both by the prophet Jeremiah and by St. Paul. We are the clay on the wheel. If God is to make us into the pot he wants, whether it be the humble earthenware kitchen salt jar or the spiritual equivalent of the Ming Vase, we need to be several things.

First we need to be centred on Him. Off centre and the clay will just wobble out of control and to its own destruction.

Second we need to be responsive. The water of our rebirth needs to flow over us and the tears of sorrow for sin keep us open to the moulding of the Master. Dry hard hearts resist change and, like dried out clay, become useless, unfit for purpose, unfit for the mission of the Church.

Third, we need to be ready to be whatever He requires of us. He alone knows the purpose of our creation. It is no good me wanting to be a rococo milk jug in a Vatican tea set if God wants me to be brown broth pot in Bodmin.

So my prayer, and yours, this Advent must conform, as ever, to the prayer of Jesus, in the Paternoster and in Gethsemane - 'Thy will be done – Not my will but yours, Father'. And the prayer of our Blessed Mother, 'Be it unto me according to Thy Word.'

Finally, like the clay and like all the saints of God, we will have to go through the fire if we are to be of enduring service. So, let us embrace the wonderful and exciting season of Advent filled with hope and longing ready to cast ourselves utterly on God's mercy and ready to be remade in His image through the grace of the only Christmas present that really matters, Jesus Christ Our Lord. Let us prepare our confession fully and make our confession, praying daily: 'I am the clay. You are the potter, Lord. Remake me for your service.'