

“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord.”

Is 2:3

Today we begin what is planned as a series of four sermons for Advent: on the Prophet Isaiah this week, on St John the Baptist next week, on St Joseph on Gaudete Sunday, and finally on Our Blessed Lady on the last Sunday before the Nativity of her Son. These are the four key figures in the season of Advent. We will note that the Book of Isaiah spans around sixty chapters in the Old Testament. (Sixty-five to be precise.) By contrast, St John the Baptist’s words in the New Testament add up to just sixty words. And by the time we reach St Joseph, we find that not a single spoken word of his is recorded in Sacred Scripture. It is as if the closer we draw to the Person of Christ, the less we have to say, and the more a silence descends. After all, what value mere human words in the presence of the Word Himself?

Advent is perhaps the richest, the most abundant and fruitful, and most multi-layered of all the seasons in the Church’s year. Great volumes could be – and have been – written about it, but today we shall consider just one aspect.

Isaiah is arguably the greatest and most popular of all the Old Testament prophets. At least, his book is longer than anyone else’s and we hear more from him in Advent than from any other individual. It’s Isaiah who gives us some of the most famous readings in Advent, such as the prophecy that ‘a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel’ (Is 7:14).

In today’s excerpt from his prophecy, Isaiah holds up before our eyes a wonderful image. Even if you have never been to the Holy Land, picture Jerusalem from afar, and see the city of David nestled high on the hill that the king chose for his capital. It stands on the highest of all the nearby hills, and in one of the psalms we are told that the other hills

look with envy on Mount Sion for having been chosen as the mountain on which God is pleased to dwell (Ps 67:17). The symbolism is clear: this is an image of heaven, the home for which we all yearn; the place to which all nations shall flow and to which all peoples shall come. This is the home of the God of Jacob, and from this mountain shall come forth the law of God which will teach us the paths we must walk if we are to enter the gates of the heavenly Jerusalem.

But if we really are to enter those hallowed portals we must, as St Paul says in today's Second Reading, 'cast off the works of darkness and put on the armour of light.' We must put aside sin and be clothed in virtue.

This isn't some nice and cosy thought at a time of year when all is jollity and pleasantness. No! Something real and concrete is being demanded of us! We must change if we are ever to get to heaven. Just because we come to Mass Sunday by Sunday, or even every day, that doesn't mean that we are necessarily guaranteed a place in heaven when we die. To get to heaven we must change – and change often – from our old ways. The challenge this Advent is to identify one persistent, sinful habit, and change it into a virtue before Christmas. Be it impatience or anger, jealousy or idleness, a laxity in prayer life or even the presumption that all is more or less alright between you and God, all persistent sinful habits must be challenged, rooted out – painfully if necessary – and transformed by God's grace into something that may be more fittingly laid as a gift beside the manger in Bethlehem.

What we call a *particular examen* is a useful tool for tackling a particular, persistent fault. Each evening, instead of making a general examination of conscience (which we should already be doing as part of our night prayers, and which we would still need to do immediately before going to Confession), try the following:

- first, give thanks for all the graces of the day;

- second, examine in what ways and how many times you have been unfaithful to God's grace with regard to your identified particular fault;
- third, make an Act of Contrition;
- and fourth, make a resolution for the next day concerning that particular fault, and ask for God's help.

Repeat this process every evening. Take as long as necessary to root out that particular fault: days, weeks, perhaps longer. But persist in this particular examen each evening, focusing on the chosen sinful habit, and confess it each time you go to Confession – along with any others sins too of course – until that bad habit is changed into a good habit.

In today's Gospel passage, Our Lord warns of the need to be awake and watchful because we do not know on what day Our Lord will come to gather us up for judgment. We all think we have plenty of time, but those of you who have lost loved ones suddenly and unexpectedly know that we do not necessarily have all the time in the world!

We shall never enter the city at the top of the mountain if we are not prepared to put in the time and effort that climbing a mountain demands.