

Isaiah ch 61 v1-4, 8-11

John ch1 v6-8, 19-28

We are in the season of Advent, but what does Advent mean? We say the word, but do we understand what this season is all about?

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, who was the last pope wrote: -

"Advent is concerned with that very connection between memory and hope which is so necessary to man. Advent's intention is to awaken the most profound and basic emotional memory within us, namely, the memory of the God who became a child. This is a healing memory; it brings hope.

The purpose of the Church's year is continually to rehearse her great history of memories, to awaken the heart's memory so that it can discern the star of hope....

It is the beautiful task of Advent to awaken in all of us memories of goodness and thus to open doors of hope."

John R. Brokhoff, an American minister and author asks, "What has happened to the old-fashioned, spiritual Christmas?"

The cause is our disregard of Advent. The church set aside this four-week pre-Christmas season as a time of spiritual preparation for Christ's coming. It is a time of quiet anticipation.

If Christ is going to come again into our hearts, there must be repentance. Without repentance, our hearts will be so full of worldly things that there will be 'no room in the inn' for Christ to be born again....

We have the joy, not of celebration, which is the joy of Christmas, but the joy of anticipation."

“Jesus Christ Superstar, do think you’re what they say you are?” So goes the lyrics to the title song of the musical Jesus Christ Superstar. Never mind did he think he was who they say he was. The more pertinent question is do we think he was who he said he was?

Down through the centuries, many have, I’m sure, asked the same question.

Today in Advent, we pause to remember all of God’s messengers who prepare the way for the Saviour’s coming and the hope that entails. And of course, naturally we think very much of John the Baptist. We considered John’s role last week and this week, we’ll consider his part in the story of Jesus once more.

John is presented as the one who announces by his own words, the Jesus, “the Word of God” who will be shortly revealed to the world. He expresses his mission in a story-like form gleaned from Old Testament prophecy,

“I am a voice crying in the wilderness, make straight the way for the Lord.” John’s ministry was effective.

He was the last of the old-style prophets. Perhaps the greatest of them. But he was still subordinate to Jesus.

Some people thought he might be the Messiah, but John was only a voice, a pointer to the true King. That was his function. Any greatness he had came from the greatness of the one whose coming he foretold. John had his head screwed on the right way. He knew who he wasn’t. Now that’s a bit of a funny thing to say, but it’s something we all should know – to know who we’re not.

There's a story of a woman alone in a lift. At the next floor, in gets Robert Redford, the movie star.

As the lift makes its way up the floors, the woman found herself staring at the movie star. Gents, it's a bit like in teenage years getting a dance with a beautiful girl and then finding the power of speech has suddenly left you. You end up saying something inane because you can't think of anything else to say.

So, this poor woman, in a state of excitement and nervousness blurted out: "Are you the real Robert Redford?" To which Redford responded, "Only when I'm alone."

The story reveals that Robert Redford is not just a pretty face, but he has grown into a wisdom that must serve him well. You see, like John the Baptist, he knows who he is not.

The last thing that John wanted was for people to look at him.

He wanted people to forget him and look to the true King. People listened to John; they came out to him in the wilderness. He had a story to tell about the Word made flesh."

In Isaiah we read "he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted".

Later on, in John the Baptists ministry, we read that he sent his own disciples to ask almost the same question as is asked in the Jesus Christ Superstar song I mentioned a couple of minutes ago.

"Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" John had been in prison for some time and probably wondered

why Jesus wasn't having a greater effect and perhaps why he, John, hadn't been freed from prison.

That was John the Baptist wondering these things. I wonder how often we are tempted to question Jesus when he appears not to be doing things in the way we would expect or like them done and within a time frame that suits us?

The "me" of Isaiah 61, our Old Testament passage this morning, is the Servant speaking of his own God-given ministry. The passage speaks powerfully of transformation.

In Isaiah 61 we find the instrument of transformation when it says, "the Lord has anointed me." Make no mistake, this is a powerful passage. Here we have the blending, the coming together of terms that relate to the Servant and the Messianic King.

On this third Sunday of Advent, as we remember God's messengers, it is appropriate to remember Isaiah who was preparing the way.

Preparing the way for the transforming power that would be found in the life and death of Jesus Christ.

The setting of this passage continues to be the captivity viewed from Babylon and from the ruined Jerusalem. To its original hearers, the promise would have been as literal as the earlier threat of exile.

But as Jesus fulfills it, it takes on a different perspective.

Jesus could quote this passage at the outset of his career because he had already accepted, in his baptism and temptation, the role of Suffering Servant, and with it the cross. So, what kind of transformation does Isaiah anticipate?

Isaiah points to two important aspects of Christ's redeeming work. First, we find the righteousness that can be found through Christ. In the passage it speaks of "garments of salvation" and "a robe of righteousness."

As Paul reminded the Church in Rome, "This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe." Isaiah has repeatedly highlighted that the world can find no salvation of its own and now he points to the only one who can provide that salvation. It was a fact that the Apostle Paul wanted to stress to the Christians in Corinth.

Having seen the righteousness that is conferred from without, we now find the righteousness that springs from within.

The prophet's imagery of a young plant shooting forth, points to vitality that Paul referred to in one of his letters.

"Jesus Christ Superstar..." Isaiah pointed to Christ's coming and with it, the transforming power of God. Down through the years, people have asked if Jesus really was who his messengers said he was. Many who asked that question have become convinced that he was who he said he was. My prayer is that we all know that for ourselves this Advent time. Amen.