

# The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Third Sunday of Advent (Year A)  
11<sup>th</sup> December 2022

*'Strengthen the slackened hands, bolster the tottering knees'.*

The prophet Isaiah has words of encouragement for the exiles, far away from home, away from all that is familiar, away from God's own city and God's own dwelling place. Grim as this exile may be, the desert that stands between the people of Israel and their home has mysteriously begun to turn green. The barren soil has begun to bloom; the flowers have started to appear and give the desert a party appearance, it looks as if it is in its celebration robe, full of joy and wonder. What can this mean?

What it means is that the time of exile is nearly over. The prophet sees this. The exiles will return, through the flowering desert. It is time to be optimistic, even if the return has not yet quite begun. Strengthen the slackened hands, he tells the people, and bolster the tottering knees.

Fast forward eight hundred years or so, and John the Baptist is in prison. He has fallen foul of a toxic mix of greed, weakness, lust and jealousy in the royal house, and knows this cannot end well for him. Deprived of his freedom, he is also out of touch with what is being said, and what is being done. He hears miraculous stories about the Lord, but he does not see them with his own eyes. Can these stories be true? Was his prophetic voice, which seemed so clear and so sure when he spoke, correct? Or had he become carried away? If only he could see what was happening! So he sends his friends to find out. Are you the one? The reply sounds across the centuries like a great roar. Be his eyes and ears for him, tell him what you see, tell him what you hear: the blind see, the deaf hear, lepers are cleansed, the lame walk, this is something out of the ordinary, this is something new, this is like a desert bursting into flower. So, the Baptist's friends go back to him in the prison. They have news which will strengthen his slackened hands, and bolster his tottering knees. He was right, it has started, the world is being renewed. The tide of renewal may ebb and flow over the centuries that follow, but it has begun. The flowers in the desert will never wholly die out.

John had come to prepare the way, and that is exactly what he did. His hands may have slackened, but now they are strong again.

This Gospel passage calls us to two Advent tasks – tasks for all year round, in fact, but tasks to rediscover in Advent: to prepare the way of the Lord, and to strengthen the slackened hands.

To prepare the way of the Lord means to break open the complacency and the self-satisfaction of a world that looks tired. And the world does look tired. There are signs of new life, of imagination and hope, but they are in danger of being strangled by a smog of cynicism and self-interest. The danger, we discover in this Advent season, is that the Church is in danger of looking tired too; tired and old. But the Church is always young, always new. So, our Advent task is to allow God to strengthen our tired limbs and to bring the exciting new life of Christ to the forefront. John's role was to get the people ready to hear the Saviour, to see that here is something new and exciting.

The Church's role is always to do the same thing, to prepare a way for God, to wake people up to their need of a Saviour, and then show them the way to the Saviour who desires their salvation.

Prepare the way. This means, first of all, becoming a community of saints, as Bishop Richard has called us to be [The Word who is Life version 2 para 1.3]. This involves becoming, as a community, a star of hope in a dark world. It means being a people of love and faith. It means being a sort of lens that focuses people's sight on 'the One who is utterly attractive' [WWIL v2 para1.4]. It challenges us to be the sort of gathering which, when people encounter it for the first time, makes them think: 'I do not really understand what they are doing, I do not really know what it is about, but there is something about them which is engaging, challenging, authentic, and I would like to know more'. To prepare the way means to point out into the desert, to where the flowers are appearing, and say 'Look, it is not all gloomy, there are points of light in all the self-indulgence and the violence and the awkwardness; although there is much suspicion and mistrust, there are also love, and gentleness and generosity'. It means puncturing the balloon of materialism so that we can see there is more to things, to people, than meets the eye, and the world around us is charged with meaning and beauty that are far more than the merely physical.

John the Baptist's question brings about a powerful divine roar that proclaims God is at work. Our role is to hear that roar, across the centuries, and to take it up. To make our lives a witness to the simple truth that God is, indeed, at work. The flowers are appearing in the desert. The world needs light, the world needs hope. God is, indeed, at work. Our role is to keep our eyes and ears open for this, as John's disciples did, and to make sure the world cannot ignore it.