

## Third Sunday of Advent (B)

### Christmas, As Real As Ever, But Different This Year



*The readings on this Third Sunday of Advent prompt me to go to three places. It hasn't been a year when travel was possible but at least I can imagine three places that we might visit this morning: Bethany, mentioned in the last line of the Gospel, Thessalonica –St Paul was writing to the community there, and Nazareth –I will say why in a moment.*

*Firstly, we go to Bethany, on the far side of the Jordan, where John was baptising. John is our Advent companion at the moment, and we look forward from next Thursday to a new companion, Mary, in the last week before Christmas, when her son would be born at Bethlehem. John was with us last Sunday, out in the wilderness, preaching repentance: repent for the forgiveness of your sins. Near the river Jordan, he was also baptising those who accepted that message of repentance. He spoke of someone who would come with a more powerful baptism that brings us into the very life of God as well as bringing us the forgiveness of our sins.*

*Today, he is questioned about his role and identity. He is asked, Who are you? He answers clearly that he is not Elijah or one of the prophets returning as many thought would happen. He is not the Christ, the Messiah, that was expected. He was, and this is also stated just as clearly, he was a voice that cries in the wilderness: make a straight way for the Lord. He was preparing the way for the coming of the Christ, the Messiah. Repent, the word used, it is in Greek because the Gospels were written in Greek, metanoia, has a sense of turning to God, turning round, changing direction if necessary, having a change of mind, better still, a change of heart. John is saying to us: Repent for the forgiveness of your sins.*

*We might, especially at this time, think in terms of going to confession. Given the dangers of the pandemic, it is important to remember that God is a forgiving God, no limit to his gift of forgiveness. In these times, indeed at all times, that forgiveness is ours once we express our need of that forgiveness and our sorry for sin. Think of the gift of God's forgiveness as a journey that may end in the sacrament of penance but all along that journey we are already graced with God's mercy and compassion, we already enjoy his forgiveness.*

*Jesus came among us to bring good news, to proclaim freedom, to bind up hearts that are broken. Those words are in our first reading from the prophet Isaiah. And when Jesus went to the synagogue in the town of Nazareth, the town where he grew up, on the Sabbath day, he was given the scroll to read, the scroll with the reading we heard and where we find those words. He gave the homily, we have only one sentence, maybe that was the complete homily,*

*just one sentence but it said everything: Today in your hearing this reading is being fulfilled. The promise has been fulfilled. Jesus the Christ has come among us, born of Mary at Bethlehem.*

*Jesus is among us. He comes to us, gathered here. He comes to us as those at home join our congregation here. It is a real and spiritual communion. He comes to us in one another. In a special way we meet him in those in need: As long as you did this to one of these, my sisters or brothers, you did it to me.*

*The third place we visit is the town in Greece, where St Paul writes to the Christian community –our second reading. Thessalonica or Thessaloniki is about 300 kilometres north of Athens, the second biggest city in Greece. Paul, who visited that town, writes back to them. They were a people who knew that Christ had come but also that he would come again in glory. Advent is about Christmas, but it is also a reminder that Christ will come again. Some of the people in Thessalonica gave up working just to wait for that second coming. Paul told them to get back to work!*

*In the short reading today, Paul is finishing his first letter. He wishes them peace. Very appropriately for us too, he says: may you all be kept safe. He says: for all things, give thanks to God. He says: pray constantly. And on the Sunday known as Gaudete Sunday: be happy at all times. Let this time be a happy times for us all. Let us do all we can to make it happy, even if it is going to be very different. Make sure it is different by following the guidelines. We are entering very dangerous times. But they are times when what is important hasn't changed. What is important, what is the real meaning of Christmas, is just as real and present as ever.*

