

Second Sunday of Advent

'Console my people' these words not only begin the First Reading of this weekend's Mass (Isaiah 40:1-5.9-11) but also the second part of the book of the prophet Isaiah telling the people that their time of exile in Babylon will soon be at an end and that they can begin to look forward to returning home to Jerusalem and the towns of Judah.

In as much as a number of people have described our current situation as a 'time of exile', a time when much of what we took for granted was suddenly taken away from us, then we may have also been consoled this week with the news that a vaccine has been approved and that an end to our predicament is in sight.

If we know something of our Biblical history then we will know that for the exiles who returned to Jerusalem it wasn't a quick 'return to the past' but that it took time for them to adjust to a new normal and to build for a new future. It will no doubt be the same for us. Even when all the covid restrictions are lifted, life will be different to what it was like before the pandemic started. Many will have lost loved ones who they have not had a proper opportunity to grieve for. Others will have lost jobs, businesses, or educational opportunities which they may or may not recover over time.

In the Gospel Reading for the Second Sunday of Advent (Mark 1:1-8) John the Baptist takes up the call of the prophet Isaiah to 'prepare a way for the Lord' by telling them that someone is following him who is more powerful than he is, one who will baptise not with water but rather with the Holy Spirit. During Advent we await for the 'Christ who is to come' whilst remembering that he is always present in our midst. We can reflect on our own experience of the past nine months or so when our normal parish and church life has been greatly disrupted. Did we feel that we also lost our connection with the Lord, or did we become more aware of the Lord's presence in our lives than we previously had been? During our time of 'exile' some people's faith will have been tested and other people's faith will have been strengthened. When we are able to gather again as a community we will all have been on slightly different journeys and so we will not be back at the point from which we started but we will all need to be sensitive to one another as we adjust to a new reality.

Although we can see hope for the future we will have to live through this Advent and Christmas with the limitations that we have learnt to live with in the past few months. Perhaps the readings of this Second Sunday of Advent invite us to recognise our own longings for an end to our exile, and above all to recognise that the Lord continues to be with us even if we sometimes do not recognise his presence. If we want to know where we are to find him, then as well as seeking his presence through prayer, this is also the season (and especially so this year) when we can reach out to others and in serving and giving to others we will encounter him.

For video version see: <https://youtu.be/k3XnvnOIX54>