

## Homily: Second Sunday of Advent 2021 (Year C)

This time last year, when we weren't allowed to meet people indoors, on my day off I'd sometimes go for a walk with a friend. We'd stroll for a couple of hours along a path which had been laid where a railway line had once stood – in the days before Dr Beeching's cuts. It's always easy to spot these old railway lines – the paths are always quite straight and very level. If there are any hills, they have been cut through, and any valleys or dips have been bridged in some way. Trains don't go up and down hills too well, and they don't like sharp corners.

Long before the railways had been thought of, God already spoke of valleys being filled in, mountains being laid low and winding paths being straightened. We have heard this image being used in both the first reading and the Gospel today. Every year on the Second Sunday of Advent we meet the figure of John the Baptist, the great forerunner of the Lord, who announces His coming. He is, as Isaiah prophesied, “a voice that cries in the wilderness: prepare a way for the Lord, make His paths straight. Every valley will be filled in, every mountain and hill be laid low, winding ways will be straightened and rough roads be made smooth.” The journey is to be made easier. Whose journey? The Lord's! He is coming to us; this is the meaning of Advent. So we are to make His journey easier by removing the obstacles which we sometimes place between ourselves and Him.

We might ask ourselves what these obstacles really are. The winding roads are, perhaps, the twists and turns we sometimes take in life, the myriad of things which distract us from really seeking the Lord. The rough roads are those times we allow life to unsettle us, we allow worries and cares to take over, and so we find it harder to meet God. The valleys perhaps speak of those moments when we allow ourselves to be brought low – we forget our worth, our dignity, our value in the sight of God, and so we do not live as His children. And the mountains in some way represent our pride, our willingness to believe that we are self-sufficient, that we can somehow rise up without a Saviour. It's significant that in the Greek text of the New Testament, the word which describes the mountains being “laid low” is the word which means “to be humbled.” It's also significant that the Word of God today comes to John “in the wilderness”. This is a dry, barren place. Here, life is not taken for granted. Someone in the wilderness knows their smallness, their vulnerability, their need of others, their need of God. It is not a place where someone can easily be proud. To really live Advent, we need to know our need of God, our need of a Saviour. If we forget this, we cannot experience the hope, the expectation, the joy of this season. In the world, Advent has been completely forgotten, perhaps because the world no longer remembers its need of a Saviour.

So it's good to notice our need of a Saviour, our need of Jesus. It's good for us to be aware of the ways in which we struggle, the times we feel low, the periods when life is a hard slog, the ways in which we lack love for God and others, the seeming lack of progress we sometimes make in life. None of this should make us downcast; instead, it should awaken in us our desire for the Saviour; it should fill us with the joyful hope of Advent. One group who absolutely knew their need of a Saviour are the people spoken of by the prophet Baruch in

the first reading. They have been carried off into exile, away from their homes in Jerusalem. They are no longer free; they are oppressed and living in a foreign land. But the Lord promises that they will be saved and allowed to return home. And God will help them on their journey: “For God has decreed the flattening of each high mountain, of the everlasting hills, the filling of the valleys to make the ground level so that Israel can walk in safety under the glory of God.” It’s the same image we heard in the Gospel, but with one important difference: there, it referred to the *Lord’s* journey being made smooth, as He comes to us; here, it refers to the journey of *God’s people* as they return home from exile.

You may think, “But I don’t live in exile! What has this to do with me?” Yet there is a sense in which we all live in exile. This very life is an exile from our true home, heaven. That’s why it sometimes feels difficult, dry, taxing, like a wilderness. Advent brings us a beautiful promise: if we make a straight way for the Lord, He will come to us in our exile, and then He, in turn, will make straight our path to heaven. Let’s humble ourselves in the wilderness this Advent; let’s recognise our need of a Saviour and long for Him with joy; and let’s do all we can to remove every obstacle in His path, especially our pride, so that He can come to us and make for us a straight and level road to the salvation which He comes to bring.

Fr Andrew

