

2nd Sunday of Advent

What is it like to be an exile? Most of us can only try to imagine the feelings. While many people today move far from their place of birth, to leave your homeland against your will, and know that, for the foreseeable future, you cannot return is something quite different. Millions of people find themselves in that situation today, whether in the Middle East, or the Rohingya in Burma, or those trying to cross the Mediterranean for a better life in Europe. The Israelites for whom Isaiah prophesies are in this situation. A poverty-stricken remnant has remained in Israel, but all the leading figures have been deported to Babylon. God will soon prompt the Persian King Cyrus to allow them to return home and rebuild the Temple. The message for the people is one of consolation. Their exile will soon be over. God will gather them in. He will not only gather them in. He will join them. The glorious presence of God will return to his Temple.

This restoration was not complete. Despite the rebuilding of the temple, and now, in Our Lord's time, Herod's extension and adornment of the Temple, there was something missing. There was no king, and the Jewish people remained scattered all over the world. John the Baptist gives voice to that hidden hope and expectation. His task is to prepare the way, but someone more powerful is coming, the Lord's anointed King, who will baptise with the Spirit and with fire. It is a message of consolation for our own time. There is an inner longing in all of us that can be satisfied only by God.

Advent reminds us that spiritually we are all exiles. Our homeland is in heaven with God. We must make the best of our lives here on earth, but we must not become too comfortable, or lose that sense of edge, a hope for more. The first coming of Christ at Christmas was a sign and pledge that these are not vain hopes. He has gone to prepare a place for us, and he will return in glory at the end of time. For our part we must prepare a way for him in our hearts.

When it becomes possible for exiles to return home they do not waste any time. They pack up their belongings and travel as soon as they can to fulfil their dream. Anything that can speed their return will be welcomed. Isaiah speaks of filling in valleys and levelling hills to make a straight highway. Later on, in chapter 45 he makes it clear that this is not all down to us. God himself will accomplish this work through his anointed servant.

For us the obstacles are not physical but spiritual. Human weakness and sin, wrong priorities, ingrained habits provide valleys and hills that come between us and God. Advent is a time for us to listen to the message of St John the Baptist. Part of the work is ours. We must want to be close to God and to overcome the obstacles – this is repentance. We must be willing to identify and name the obstacles if we are to overcome them. This is the role of our examination of conscience and the reason for placing them before God through his representative, the priest. But the most important part is done by God himself. It is Jesus who fills in the valleys and levels the hills, making a straight path to the Father. He does this by the words of forgiveness that he uses the lips of the priest to say to us. When we hear the words "I absolve you from your sins" it is Jesus who says them to us. We are once again in a state of grace – no obstacle between us and God. He welcomes us home.