

## 2<sup>nd</sup> SUNDAY OF ADVENT

## YEAR C

By summer 2005, the race to host the 2012 Olympic Games had been whittled down to two serious contenders – Paris and London. The announcement that London’s bid had been successful was greeted with euphoria – and no small measure of surprise – in the British capital. Winning against such long-standing and near rivals made victory all the sweeter – and even the French President’s jibes about the poor quality of British food couldn’t dampen the celebrations. However, on the very next day the city was devastated by the 7<sup>th</sup> of July bombings on a London bus and the underground rail system. The tremendous loss of life soon put all thoughts of the Olympics out of everyone’s mind. Petty rivalries were quickly forgotten in the face of such tragic loss.

The people of Israel knew joys and sorrows in their history – they had experienced the joy of being rescued from slavery in Egypt and of being given the Promised Land to be their own. But they also experienced times of disaster when it seemed they had been abandoned by God. The prophet Baruch writes during just such a period in Israel’s history, a time of utter desolation. Israel had been defeated, Jerusalem conquered, the Temple ransacked and the people sent off into exile. Baruch, from that dark place of exile, speaks to the people of a new redemption – a new Exodus – when the people would return home to Jerusalem in triumph. As we focus once again on the empty crib Baruch reminds us of the hope and joy that Israel experienced on returning from Babylonian captivity and resettlement in Jerusalem. They had left as defeated people. They would return like royalty, their route would be prepared for their glorious return – the hills flattened, the valleys filled in, to speed them on their way. They would travel, not guarded by enemy soldiers, but accompanied by God’s mercy and integrity. The faithfulness of God would “re-member” his people, gather them together once more in their ancestral home.

That is the background for John the Baptist’s understanding of his work. He takes up that image of preparing a way – a royal road of flattened hills and filled-in valleys – to receive the coming king. And this time, the victory – the salvation – is not just for the people of Israel, but for all people: “All mankind shall see the salvation of God”, Luke reminds us.

The Gospel invites us to take to heart the full message of John the Baptist. He announces that the king is coming – salvation is on its way. But to receive that salvation, to welcome the king, we are asked to prepare a way for him – to straighten out our lives, to smooth the way for his coming. And we do that through repentance, so that our sins may be

forgiven. Baruch spoke to the people of Israel in their time of exile. Sin is the most fundamental form of exile – our exile from God. When we choose sin, when we opt for selfishness, when we allow our fears and anxiety to cripple us into inaction, then we become exiles, alienated from God, refugees from our true home.

The heights of euphoria followed by the extreme depths of devastation experienced by the city of London find their echo in nations and cities throughout history. And in our lives as individuals, we too can experience intense sorrows as well as joy. The death of a loved one, the diagnosis of an illness, betrayal in a marriage, struggles with mental illness and depression are realities which can strike any of us. These are our moments of exile, when we might feel abandoned by God. But such times are all the more painful if we know that we ourselves have contributed to the personal disasters and failures in our lives – through our own sin, selfishness, inaction or indifference.

Let's pay attention to the empty crib once again. What changes need to happen, what doubts and fears need we confront as we look forward to the coming of the Lord and prepare a place for him in our lives ?

It is precisely at these times of exile, these times of doubt and uncertainty, when God seems far away, that the voice of Baruch and the voice of the Baptist call out to us. Though we can and do experience the depths to which humanity can sink in our own lives or in the lives of those we love and care for, we have the assurance that God is coming: the Lord is near. The Lord promises that if we repent, turn back to him, he will restore us – he will remember us, put us back together, bring us home. All humankind will see his salvation. "All humankind" can seem pretty vague, a bit generalized. What it means in reality is that the Lord is promising that we – you and I personally, each and every one of us – will see the Lord's salvation. It means that we, too, can know and experience the joy of homecoming, the joy of his protection and care. Repent, receive forgiveness, let God welcome you home.