

Third Sunday of Advent

Dear Parishioners and Friends,

During the course of the coming week the focus of our Advent prayer will change. Up until now we have been listening to the prophetic writings of Isaiah and, on Sundays at least, gospel readings which flagged up the second coming of the Lord at the end of time. We were encouraged by the Church to be alert, to be on the look-out and to be perpetually vigilant in case the Lord should return at an hour when he might least be expected. The gospels are full of such warnings in both the direct advice given by the earthly Jesus as well as in some of the most memorable parables, especially that of the ten bridesmaids. Up until now, liturgically speaking at least, anticipating Christmas was considered a distraction from the more urgent need to be aware of what the Church used to call the four last things: death, judgement, heaven and hell. But now, as of 17 December, we can legitimately look forward to our annual commemoration of the Lord's birth.

At Vespers as of 17 xii the Church sings the *Major Antiphons*, these great invitations issued to the Lord to hasten and come. The scripture readings at Mass taken from the OT prophets make the forecast of Messiah's coming more specific, while the gospel each day is drawn from the Nativity narrative in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. When we were still able to sing carols, it was only as of 17 xii that we could sing *O come, o come Emmanuel*. This carol is in fact based on the *Major Antiphons* and it is one of mounting excitement about the coming of the Lord.

There are many ways in which we can prepare ourselves for the Solemnity of the Nativity. We can look carefully at each Christmas card we receive and examine how the artist of the image depicted (assuming it is inspired by the Nativity story) understood the Christmas mystery. We can then give those religious cards a prominent place in our display on mantelpiece or sideboard. We can read parts of the story quietly for ourselves by using our missal or the Bible, if we have one. The most important way in which we can prepare for Christmas is to be open and frank with all those whom we meet and admit that, for us, the religious dimension of the mid-winter festival is the most important. In fact, the run-up to Christmas gives us a unique opportunity each year to speak about our faith, especially to neighbours who might not be celebrating Christmas as we do. There is a spirit of good will abroad and we too can capitalise on that in all the social contacts we may have – social distancing and mask-wearing permitting – as we go about our daily lives. On this particular Sunday, *Gaudete/Rejoicing Sunday*, we are urged by the Church to be happy, to rejoice in the salvation we have already received, to rejoice in being disciples of the Lord who comes, and anticipated joy in the annual celebration of this birth.

Father Patrick