

FOOD FOR THE JOURNEY

Advent Week 2

Saints' Days this Week

6th December

St Nicholas, Bishop

St Nicholas (fourth century) was born in Turkey, it is thought, and became Bishop of Myra. Imprisoned under the Emperor Diocletian, he would have attended the Council of Nicæa, which opposed the Arian heresy (in which, roughly speaking, the Son was claimed to be of lesser rank than the Father). Nicholas is esteemed as patron of sailors and of children and the Christmas tradition of 'Santa Claus' (*Sinterklaas* in Dutch) is based on the kindness of St Nicholas to children, especially, in the story of the 'Pickled Boys', resurrecting them from an unpleasant fate.

Collect

WE HUMBLY implore your mercy, Lord, protect us in all dangers through the prayers of the Bishop Saint Nicholas, that the way of salvation may be open before us. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever.

7th December St Ambrose, Bishop and Doctor of the Church

St Ambrose (c 340-397) was born in Trier – then part of Roman Gaul – and was a lawyer. In 370 he was appointed Governor of Liguria and Aemilla, living in Milan. In 374 he was chosen as Bishop – though he was still a catechumen, preparing for baptism – and he proved to be an outstanding Bishop. He stood up to the Emperor and challenged the Arians. St Augustine of Hippo was a convert of his and his writings were such that he has been ranked among the Latin Doctors of the Church.

Collect

O GOD, who made the Bishop Saint Ambrose a teacher of the Catholic faith and a model of apostolic courage: raise up in your Church men after your own heart to govern her with courage and wisdom. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever.

THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

8th December

THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION does not refer, as is sometimes thought, to the conception (and subsequently the birth) of Jesus but to the conception (and subsequently the birth) of Mary his Mother. The underlying doctrine – Mary’s sinlessness from the very moment of her conception – was much discussed by theologians but finally settled by Pope Pius IX on 8th December 1854. In confirmation of the doctrine, Our Lady is said to have announced herself at Lourdes to St Bernadette Soubirous as ‘the Immaculate Conception’.

Collect

O GOD, who by the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin prepared a worthy dwelling for your Son: grant, we pray, that, as you preserved her from every stain by virtue of the Death of your Son, which you foresaw, so, through her intercession we, too, may be cleansed and admitted to your presence. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever.

Reading

Genesis 3:9-15, 20

A Showdown in Paradise

⁹ But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, 'Where are you?' ¹⁰ And he said, 'I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.' ¹¹ He said, 'Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?' ¹² The man said, 'The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.' ¹³ Then the LORD God said to the woman, 'What is this that you have done?' The woman said, 'The serpent beguiled me, and I ate.' ¹⁴ The LORD God said to the serpent,

'Because you have done this,
cursed are you above all cattle,
and above all wild animals;
upon your belly you shall go,
and dust you shall eat
all the days of your life.

¹⁵ I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your seed and her seed;
he shall bruise your head,
and you shall bruise his heel.'

²⁰ The man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living.

Reflection

THIS extract from the story of Adam and Eve is not, of course, a historical account but a reflective – and, we believe, inspired – meditation on the origins of the human condition. It is paralleled by other Near Eastern creation myths. How was it that such a sublime creature – man in male

and female sexes – came to be limited by suffering and death? How was it that we learnt to make bad choices? Or, as I always say, how was it that, offered a stick of celery or a jam doughnut, we usually opt for the doughnut? In Romans 7:15 St Paul says this:

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

Theologians call this tendency to make wrong, unhealthy, or sinful choices 'concupiscence' and, not only for St Paul but for subsequent theologians – St Augustine of Hippo most notably – this whole notion of human frailty is explained as 'original sin', the sin of Adam who ate the forbidden fruit. What happens when Adam and Eve eat the fruit is that they have the knowledge of good and evil – symbolised by their realisation that they were naked. Once this happens, Adam, Eve, and the serpent are driven out of the Garden of Paradise. Christian thought builds on this 'original sin' of disobedience, seeing its consequences in Adam having to do manual labour, Eve having to endure the labour of childbirth, and the serpent being confined to slithering along on its belly. The serpent as tempter becomes the enemy of the man and the woman and the prophecy is that the man and woman will get the better of the serpent, the serpent being a symbol of evil. Eve herself is subsequently portrayed as the tempter – the woman who led Adam astray. As well as in St Paul, this is found in Jewish thought - see Sirach 25:24:

**From a woman sin had its beginning,
and because of her we all die.**

All this is reflected upon in Christian devotion and spiritual writing but, for today at least – the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady – we focus on the last verse of the reading:

The man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living.

It follows, poetically at least, that if, as St Paul maintains, Christ is the New Adam – the 'Second Adam to the Fight' as St John Henry Newman put it - then Mary is the New Eve. The mediævals well understood this, and, as the fifteenth century carol 'Adam lay y-bounden' puts it:.

**Ne hadde the appil take ben,
the appil taken ben,
Ne hadde never our lady
a ben hevene quen.**

Collect for Advent 2

ALMIGHTY and merciful God, may no earthly undertaking hinder those who set out in haste to meet your Son, but may our learning of heavenly wisdom gain us admittance to his company. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Monday in the Second Week of Advent

Reading

Isaiah 35:1-10

The Return of the Redeemed to Zion

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus ² it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.

The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.

They shall see the glory of the LORD,
the majesty of our God.

³ Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.

⁴ Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
'Be strong, fear not!

Behold, your God
will come with vengeance,
with the recompense of God.

He will come and save you.'

⁵ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

⁶ then shall the lame man leap like a hart,
and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;

⁷ the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

⁸ And a highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not pass over it,

and fools shall not err therein.
⁹ No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.
¹⁰ And the ransomed of the LORD shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

REFLECTION

TODAY'S First Reading speaks of the transformation of the desert from a wilderness into fertile ground. We can imagine the dependency on water of a people whose land had no extensive river system. Drought was a constant threat. The joy of Zion as a fertile place is portrayed as a place where not only do the flowers bloom but the wild beasts are gone. It becomes a place of peace and plenty. This chapter of Isaiah – chapter 35 – is surrounded by frightening oracles of judgment but seems to lead a few chapters later, chapter 40, to another account of the transformation of desert and the levelling of rough and rugged terrain, preparing a highway for the return of an exiled people from Babylon to Jerusalem. This restoration of the people is a prelude to the coming of the Messiah, the Redeemer of Israel, and a heightening of the sense of expectation.

Tuesday in the Second Week of Advent

Reading

Isaiah 40:1-11

God comforts his people

40 Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God.

² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that her warfare is ended,
that her iniquity is pardoned,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.

³ A voice cries:

'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up,
 and every mountain and hill be made low;
 the uneven ground shall become level,
 and the rough places a plain.

⁵ And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
 and all flesh shall see it together,
 for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.'

⁶ A voice says, 'Cry!'

And I said, 'What shall I cry?'

All flesh is grass,
 and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.

⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades,
 when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
 surely the people is grass.

⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades;
 but the word of our God will stand for ever.

⁹ Get you up to a high mountain,
 O Zion, herald of good tidings;
 lift up your voice with strength,
 O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
 lift it up, fear not;
 say to the cities of Judah,
 'Behold your God!'

¹⁰ Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might,
 and his arm rules for him;
 behold, his reward is with him,
 and his recompense before him.

¹¹ He will feed his flock like a shepherd,
 he will gather the lambs in his arms,
 he will carry them in his bosom,
 and gently lead those that are with young.

Reflection

THE LAST verse of the reading from Isaiah 40 reassures that the Lord will come to his people as a shepherd. 'Feed', 'gather', 'carry', and 'gently lead' are all deeply reassuring as images and the description of pastoral care – which underlies the language of shepherding – is given added depth by the phrases 'in his arms' and 'in his bosom'. The flock at its most vulnerable is caught in the phrase 'those that are with young'. This is the message of comfort that the Lord gives to his people, He speaks of peace and pardon and of an enduring presence, contrasted with the transitoriness of grass that withers and flowers that fade. Nonetheless this oracle of salvation is

not in any sense insipid or weak: the herald must tell it on the mountains that the Lord God comes with might. We shall know him as *hagios ischyros*, holy and mighty, as we say on Good Friday. His bringing of justice is likened to the flattening of mountains and the building of highways. This is the message that St John the Baptist will preach as the adult ministry of Jesus is about to begin. It is the message of which we need to be reminded as we wait to celebrate the coming of Christ as our Saviour and Lord.

Wednesday in the Second Week of Advent

Reading

Isaiah 40:25-31

The Lord gives strength to the weary.

⁵ To whom then will you compare me,
that I should be like him? says the Holy One.

²⁶ Lift up your eyes on high and see:
who created these?

He who brings out their host by number,
calling them all by name;
by the greatness of his might,
and because he is strong in power
not one is missing.

²⁷ Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,
'My way is hid from the LORD,
and my right is disregarded by my God'?

²⁸ Have you not known? Have you not heard?

The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He does not faint or grow weary,
his understanding is unsearchable.

²⁹ He gives power to the faint,
and to him who has no might he increases strength.

³⁰ Even youths shall faint and be weary,
and young men shall fall exhausted;

³¹ but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.

Reflection

A DAY or two ago, we had the passage from Isaiah 35 about the wilderness being turned into a fertile land and we linked it with Isaiah 40, the beginning of an entirely new section, sometimes referred to as 'Deutero-Isaiah', 'Second Isaiah'. Then we had that memorable passage, famous from Handel's *Messiah* as the aria 'Comfort ye my people'. The passage we are now studying – from later on in chapter 40 – sets out the implications of a glorious future for God's people and for Jerusalem. This it does not by spelling the future out more but by enlarging our vision of God. God is no longer seen as the God of Israel and the God of Judah, the God of two kingdoms, north and south, but as

the everlasting God

the Creator of the ends of the earth (v28)

This is how the spiritual relevance of Second Isaiah links with our understanding. We are dealing not only with the God of the Hebrews but with the God of the whole universe, the God and Father of us all, and the promise to all believers is that:

they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,

they shall mount up with wings like eagles,

they shall run and not be weary,

they shall walk and not faint. (v31)

Thursday in the Second Week of Advent

Reading

Isaiah 41:13-20

I, the Holy One of Israel, are your Redeemer

I, the LORD your God,

hold your right hand;

it is I who say to you, 'Fear not,

I will help you.'

14 Fear not, you worm Jacob,

you men of Israel!

I will help you, says the LORD;

your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel.

15 Behold, I will make of you a threshing sledge,

new, sharp, and having teeth;

you shall thresh the mountains and crush them,

and you shall make the hills like chaff;
¹⁶ you shall winnow them and the wind shall carry them away,
and the tempest shall scatter them.
And you shall rejoice in the LORD;
in the Holy One of Israel you shall glory.

¹⁷ When the poor and needy seek water,
and there is none,
and their tongue is parched with thirst,
I the LORD will answer them,
I the God of Israel will not forsake them.

¹⁸ I will open rivers on the bare heights,
and fountains in the midst of the valleys;
I will make the wilderness a pool of water,
and the dry land springs of water.

¹⁹ I will put in the wilderness the cedar,
the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive;
I will set in the desert the cypress,
the plane and the pine together;

²⁰ that men may see and know,
may consider and understand together,
that the hand of the LORD has done this,
the Holy One of Israel has created it.

Reflection

IN THE last chapter of Isaiah, chapter 40, we learnt about the sovereignty of God – he is God of the whole world, indeed of the whole creation, and not a tribal god. But now, in chapter 41, he tells us that he will nevertheless help his chosen people, and reveals himself as the Redeemer of Israel. ‘Redeemer’ is a word which occurs several times in this part of Isaiah. It is specially to be noticed when it is linked with the favoured reference to God in Isaiah, ‘the Holy One of Israel’. At this stage ‘the Redeemer’ mostly refers to the fact that God alone can restore the fortunes of a much-diminished people. The people will regain their standing among the nations, not through their own strength but because of God’s action on their behalf. As we shall see, in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, ‘Redeemer’ takes on a transformed meaning. Meanwhile to the exiles, the promises of fertility and irrigation are there to reassure them: the help which God has in mind, according to the words of the prophet, is help of a very practical kind. The emphasis on the poor and needy is a striking example of the concern of the Jewish religion for the oppressed and, as we

shall experience later in the Christian story, it is the Suffering Servant as portrayed in Isaiah – whether this is a person or a nation or both - that takes centre stage.

Friday in the Second Week of Advent

Reading

Isaiah 48:17-19

If only you had listened.....

Thus says the LORD,
your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel:
'I am the LORD your God,
who teaches you to profit,
who leads you in the way you should go.
18 O that you had hearkened to my commandments!
Then your peace would have been like a river,
and your righteousness like the waves of the sea;
19 your offspring would have been like the sand,
and your descendants like its grains;
their name would never be cut off
or destroyed from before me.'

Reflection

WE ARE in the sixth century before Christ. On the one hand we have Cyrus, the first Persian Emperor, about to defeat the Babylonians and liberate the people Israel, held in captivity in Babylon. On the other hand we have the imperative – which is there in the history books of the Hebrew Bible – that freedom, peace, and prosperity would be Israel's, if only she would be obedient to God's commandments. This might not be a new theme but, in the prophecy of Isaiah, it takes on a new depth. This is not loyalty to a tribal god and the keeping of his rules and regulations. It is discovering what is sometimes called 'ethical monotheism': there is one God, creator of all that is, and his commandments are not rules and regulations but deep underlying principles which affect how human beings organise their lives in all places and at all times. This truth is foretold by the prophets and comes to fruition in the coming of the Messiah, the Advent of the Christ.

Saturday in the Second Week of Advent

Reading

Isaiah 30:19-21, 23-26

God will be gracious when he hears your cry

O people in Zion who dwell at Jerusalem; you shall weep no more. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry; when he hears it, he will answer you. ²⁰ And though the Lord give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself any more, but your eyes shall see your Teacher. ²¹ And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way, walk in it,' when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left... ²³ And he will give rain for the seed with which you sow the ground, and grain, the produce of the ground, which will be rich and plenteous. In that day your cattle will graze in large pastures; ²⁴ and the oxen and the asses that till the ground will eat salted provender, which has been winnowed with shovel and fork. ²⁵ And upon every lofty mountain and every high hill there will be brooks running with water, in the day of the great slaughter, when the towers fall. ²⁶ Moreover the light of the moon will be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be sevenfold, as the light of seven days, in the day when the LORD binds up the hurt of his people, and heals the wounds inflicted by his blow.

Reflection

WE CONTINUE with the consideration of Jerusalem's future. What is needed is confidence in the Lord which will lead to a fertility previously unknown. Confidence requires obedience to the Lord's teaching, but such faithfulness brings great rewards. We are talking the language of apocalyptic: there is defeat for Jerusalem's enemies – 'the great slaughter' – and a great increase in the light. The moon will be as bright as the sun and the sun's light will increase sevenfold.