Hope for a World Wearied of Suffering

“Here is your God!” These words of the first reading, attributed to a prophet called the second (or Deutero)-Isaiah, are words of hope for a disheartened people. The Israelites, although freed from slavery under the Egyptians, now find themselves exiles in what is called the “Babylonian captivity”. The Babylonians had destroyed the temple in Jerusalem and exiled most of the Hebrews who were beginning to despair of ever returning to their homeland. The prophet is a scribe for Israel’s God communicating words of comfort and hope.
A popular idea at the time was to attribute hardship and misfortune in life as punishment for sin. While the prophet does not directly challenge a connection between sin and suffering, he presents the people with a far more profound message of the assurance of God’s victory over evil as well as the offer of divine mercy and forgiveness to his anointed. Such a God is not only “coming with power” but also “like a shepherd feeding his flock, holding the lambs in his arms”.

What is also clear in these verses is that God does not act alone nor impose the divine will without respect for human freedom. Rather, messengers will be sent, signs will be given, so that all people are invited to see that Israel’s God is not simply the God of the Hebrews, but the God of all the earth and every people. The most powerful of God’s messengers is, of course, John the Baptist, calling people to repent of their sins and open their hearts to see in Jesus Christ the Messiah, the Promised One.

We may almost call 2020 our own “Year of Captivity” in wake of the physical, mental, economic and spiritual challenges presented to us through such confronting experiences as bushfires and the coronavirus. There is always the temptation to give into despair forgetting that, despite human ineptitude, stupidity and sinfulness, creation is still God’s world and we are still God’s people. Our task is not to “give in” but to “act out” a new way of living focusing on the infinite mercy of God, the dignity of every human person, and the sacredness of the earth.

If bushfires and the coronavirus have anything to teach us, it is surely that our human plans are often confronted by new and unexpected life-challenges. Yet, nothing happens in isolation nor without some dimension of human responsibility. Pope Francis’ powerful encyclical *Laudato Si’* [On Care for Our Common Home] reiterates this understanding that “everything is interconnected”. On the one hand, we need to take very seriously human responsibility for global warming and environmental destruction—and to change our ways accordingly. Yet we also need to place our faith and trust in our Creator-Saviour God.

Advent is a time of both prophecy and promise. The prophet—whether Deutero-Isaiah or John the Baptist—calls us to repent and change our ways. The promise—“Here is your God!”—calms our fears and answers our deepest hopes for a world wearied of suffering.

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The God of Justice and Mercy

In our human way of seeing things, we are inclined to see justice and mercy as opposed values. At the very least, we give priority to legal rights and human justice as the very basis for a workable society. We think qualities like empathy, compassion, forgiveness and mercy might have a secondary place, but justice is surely the abiding social principle. Even the Church presents us with principles of “social justice” rather than speaking of “social mercy”!

Today’s readings present us with the image of a God in whom justice and mercy meet. Furthermore, the writer of Wisdom suggests to us that divine mercy is at the very heart of divine justice: “You are mild in judgment and govern us with great lenience ... and yet you never judge unjustly”. God, it seems, cannot act justly towards us without also acting mercifully – with tenderness, love and forgiveness.
Elsewhere in the Scriptures (2 Samuel), the problem with ‘merciless justice’ is evident in the account of King David. When confronted with the story of a rich man stealing a poor man’s sheep, David was outraged to the point of saying “he must die!”. To this, the prophet Nathan replies: “You are the man!”. Nathan reminds David of his sins, including murder and adultery. Now David’s commitment to ‘cold and unfeeling justice’ for others is replaced by his cry for forgiveness and mercy for himself. David repents, knowing his need for God’s ‘merciful justice’.

Mercy is also highlighted in the life and preaching of Jesus shown in today’s parable of the sower who was blighted with darnel or weeds being sown among the wheat. What is he to do? If he pulls out the weedy darnel, he will also lose a lot of good wheat. Rather, he decides to allow the wheat and weeds to grow together and then, at harvest time, it will be easier to separate the two.

The parable suggests that God knows the reality of the human heart: each of us is a mixture of good and evil. No matter how much we may demand justice for the world, like David, we are all capable of being blind to our own unjust treatment of others. Jesus is asking us to look at ourselves to realise we are all a “mixed crop”; and to recognise the coming reign of God does not depend on human powers but on divine grace and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

St Paul (Romans) shows a similar recognition of our human weakness by reminding us that “God knows everything in our hearts”. Yet, God will not judge us harshly but extend the hand of mercy to the extent we seek to be merciful to others. In the words of St John Paul II – so often repeated by Pope Francis – “the mercy of God is the mission of the Church”. Yes, this includes our commitment to justice, but it does so with the tender-hearted love of parents for their children. God’s justice is ever merciful.
Human Doubt and Easter Faith

Although Thomas is called the ‘twin’, he might be better named Thomas the ‘realist’. Unlike other disciples, Thomas is not about to believe in something as improbable as Jesus rising from the dead unless he has hard evidence. We might even call him Thomas the ‘sceptic’ who believes only in things he can see and touch. Yet, our “doubting Thomas” has more to teach us than is commonly realised.

In John’s Gospel, Thomas is presented as someone who does the right thing even in the face of adversity. This is shown when Jesus decides to visit the ill and dying Lazarus. Thomas urges the disciples to accompany Jesus on this difficult mission—even if they might face death: “Let us go that we may die with him” (11:16). Thomas is a person of action who is true to his word. This is in contrast to Peter who commits himself to follow Jesus to the point of death, but then denies him three times!
Nor is Thomas afraid to express his ignorance and ask the hard questions. At the Last Supper, when Jesus tells the disciples they know where he is going, Thomas bluntly expresses his confusion: “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” (Jn 14:5). Finally, from today’s Gospel, we are presented with both a “doubting Thomas” who is slow to believe, and yet someone who remains open-minded and continues to search for the truth. Once the resurrected Christ appears to him, his response is full-hearted and immediate: “My Lord and my God”.

We, like Thomas, are people caught up with deeply human doubts and questions. Unlike Thomas, we do not have the luxury of walking beside Jesus for three years in his public ministry. Yet, this is not for Thomas enough to suggest that Jesus had risen from the grave. Nor do we have the privilege of touching the wounds in the risen body of Jesus, as Thomas did. Yet, in a strange twist of events, Jesus says that you and I are even more blessed than Thomas: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe”.

Yet, our faith is not blind belief in things that others tell us. Easter faith is a genuine experience of the risen Lord who always walks with us on the journey of life. This is especially the case when we experience “crucifixion moments” in our own lives, or when our doubts threaten to overwhelm us. As Thomas’ own experience teaches, doubt is not the opposite of faith, but its pre-condition, leading us to search for the ‘hidden God’ who is closer to us than we are to ourselves.

Pope Francis says that by living our faith in loving service of others “many doubts vanish because we feel the presence of God and the truth of the Gospel”. In other words, Easter faith is less about a set of beliefs than a way of life leading us to ever deepening discipleship.
Epiphany: The Light of Christ

The Feast of the Epiphany concludes the Christmas Season with the story of visitors from the East coming to honour the newborn Jesus in Bethlehem with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. This story, told only in the Gospel of Matthew, was developed in the early Christian centuries where the Magi are given names – “Balthasar, Melchior, Gasper” – and, in some accounts, are specified as “kings of Arabia, Persia and India”. Others call the wise men astrologers since they could read the stars; others again name them sorcerers on account of their use of supernatural or magic powers.

Matthew’s more sparse account does not specify their number, names, nationalities, occupations or regal positions. For Matthew they are just “some wise men from the East” who come to pay homage to “the infant king of the Jews” by following a star. The remarkable aspect of the story, apart from the encounter with Herod, is that these visitors to Bethlehem are, like most of us, strangers from afar, outside God’s original covenant with the Jewish people. For the Gospel writer, the journey of the Magi...
announces that God’s covenant is no longer for a single people, but for everyone.

The word Epiphany means a moment of sudden, great revelation represented by a new light enabling us to see things as they really are. The birth of Jesus Christ is that new light come into the world to announce the Good News of God’s salvation is for all peoples and nations. Our response should be that of the non-Jewish Magi – but instead of worshipping Jesus with gold, frankincense and myrrh, we do so with the gifts of our different personalities, ways of life, cultures and traditions.

St John Chrysostom in the fourth century asked why the star shining in the East was only seen by the Magi? He answered that the Magi did not set out because they saw the star; rather, they saw the star because they had already set out! He adds they were searchers guided by an inner-restlessness and therefore open to experience something new.

Pope Francis says the Magi represent all of us who, refusing to let our hearts be frozen, have a longing to taste something of God in our lives. This longing for God is something more than a vague hope or distant expectation. Rather it is a deep movement in our hearts represented by Simeon who “longed to see the Saviour”, the Prodigal Son who “longed to return to his Father”, the shepherd “longing for his lost sheep”, and Mary Magdalene running to the tomb “longing to see the risen Jesus”.

In our contemporary culture it often seems God has gone missing! We know our world needs a new Epiphany to show the light of Christ. As such, we are all called to be today’s Magi by searching for signs of God’s presence in our world leading to the joyful celebration of the light of Christ shining on us and throughout the whole of creation.
Advent Reflection

**John the Baptist (and Isaiah)**

Beware of prophets with much to say you won’t want to hear on judgment day. They call your bluff and cause you fear: that day of judgment is quite near.

John the Baptist was one of these desert wild man, eating locusts and leaves. He challenges people: repent of your sin lest salvation be something you’ll never win.

You people, he said, are vipers and snakes and, for good measure, hypocrites, fakes. You might keep the law in your half-hearted way, but the law of love so quick to betray.

To change the world, look first at yourselves, straighten your paths to where the Lord dwells. Don’t be fooled by power or greed: open your hearts, acknowledge your need.
Don’t look to me, I’m not the one,
whose coming is sure as the noonday sun
to baptise you all with Spirit and fire
and lead you beyond this earthly mire.

The time of waiting is near the end
the kingdom of heaven is close at hand.
God’s justice will flourish for all to see:
in Christ alone is the victory.

John’s message so strange to our human ears:
repent and believe, raising our fears.
Abraham’s children though we may be,
without repentance, Christ we won’t see.

Not the message we wanted to hear
preparing for Christmas this time of year.
Is Christ’s coming promise or curse?
The answer is clear in Isaiah’s verse.

The wolf and lamb together will lie
with goanna and kangaroo nearby.
All tribes, peoples and nations will be
places of peace and liberty.

Things will not change by human desire
they’re gifts of the Spirit from on high.
This is the prayer of our advent song:
Christ will show us where we went wrong

And lead us all to new ways of life
where love and justice will end all strife.
These words of the prophet strike a chord
when we trust our heavenly Lord.

Advent time’s a good place to start
admitting our need for a change of heart.
As John and Isaiah both attest:
Jesus is coming to be our guest.

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