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Homily at Mass 2nd Sunday of Advent Year B – 6 December 2020

Have you received any Christmas cards yet? 2 or 3 have come my way, and even some lovely and thoughtful Christmas presents. Perhaps we've set up the Christmas tree already, and as you go round not only are the shops decked out with Christmas decorations, but any number of homes have a wreath on the front door and Christmas lights.

What words do we find on Christmas cards? Love, joy, peace, blessing, hope. Those are words we need to hear anytime, but especially this year. Isaiah suggests two or three others: "console my people", "prepare a way for the Lord", here is your God". As we gather ourselves and our thoughts, as we refocus ourselves on God and his Church, as we find our way once again to Sunday Mass, feelings of peace and consolation bubble up inside us, we feel a renewed sense of balance in our lives. As the days of December march towards Christmas you and I know that Christmas is about Christ. It is the birth of Jesus. We prepare ourselves, our hearts, our homes. The infant lying in the manger at Bethlehem, Mary's son protected by Joseph is our Saviour, friend and Lord: "Here is your God".

During Advent we reacquaint ourselves with some very familiar characters. The prophet Isaiah is certainly one: his Old Testament look is often referred as a Gospel: Isaiah himself is known as the fifth Evangelist or Gospel writer. Although he lived 700 years BC, Isaiah writes as if he were an eyewitness to our Lord's birth, his preaching and miracles, his death on the cross. Isaiah even looks forward to the Church: all peoples and nations called to the light of hope and salvation, sons and daughters of God.

Another familiar friend is John the Baptist. Today we see him, we hear him, we witness his ministry at the River Jordan. And we hear him preparing us for the Lord who comes: "Someone is following me ... I have baptized you with water but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit". All of us have received the Baptism of water, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. All of us know that to prepare well for the birth of the Son of God at Christmas, we need to immerse ourselves in what the Fathers of the Church often call "second baptism" – the Sacrament of Reconciliation – a good confession which purifies our heart and soul, gives us peace of mind, restores our friendship with God, and breathes peace into our friendship with one another.

Today is December 6 – the feast of St Nicholas. German and Dutch speakers know him as Sinter Klaus- that rings a bell for us: we call him Santa Claus. St Nicholas was a bishop: that's where Santa gets his red outfit from. As a young man, Nicholas learnt of a poor family where three daughters had no dowry for their wedding. Wealthy himself, Nicholas provided a dowry for the three girls, throwing three bags of gold into the open window of their house. That was enough to make him the patron saint of the poor, newlyweds and brides, as well as bankers, merchants and pawnbrokers.

There are some who think that St Nicholas is no more than legend. Pope Benedict however was able to find the name Nicholas of Myra on the documents of the Council of Nicea 325: the Council which unleashed the mystery of Christ, the Son of God born amongst us, Mary's Son, clothed in our flesh: God's great gift of love to a world desperate for love and mercy, desperate for a Saviour. The charity of St Nicholas puts flesh on the charity of God, who calls us to "love one another as I have loved you".

The name Nicholas is derived from the Greek word NIKE – ‘victory’. Young parishioners are familiar enough with that word – it’s a brand of sportswear. It’s symbol is the tick we see on footballer’s boots and on T shirts, shorts and all the rest.

Christ’s birth at Bethlehem announces God’s victory – human sin and the calamity of the world doesn’t have the last word. Rather God’s saving word is Jesus – a name which means “God saves”. And in the person of the infant of Bethlehem we behold and embrace “God is with us”.