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Homily at Mass 2nd Sunday of Advent Year A – 8 December 2019

The Advent Season, like the Christmas story, is made up of all sorts of people. St Paul mentions today the great story of Sacred Scripture is made up of the stories and example of countless people “who did not give up and were helped by God”. During Advent you and I share the hope of God’s People, the Jewish people who longed for, hoped for, looked out for the Messiah. God had promised to our first parents, Adam and Eve. The prophet Isaiah voices this hope as he gives us a pen picture of the promised Messiah – born from the stock of Jesse, anointed by the Spirit with wisdom, might, power and knowledge. The time will come when a little boy will appear amongst his creation – when we look at the Christmas scene we see ourselves as the poor shepherds or the rich kings, but we also see the cave, the star, the angels and the animals: earth and heaven, and even the animal kingdom bow down in worship, awe, praise and wonder before the Son of God born among us, with us, for us.

The pace of the Advent Season quickens today with the appearance of St John the Baptist – one of the most significant figures of the Advent story. “The last and greatest of the prophets” Jesus calls him. A kinsman of Jesus, he is the Lord’s herald, his announcer, his forerunner. His message, his cry: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand”. The kingdom of heaven is Jesus himself: the place where God is fully present – in Christ we can touch heaven. His Gospel is the joy of heaven. His resurrection is a sign of the eternal life of heaven. His Eucharist is a taste of all that heaven is.

We hear John the Baptist call us to repentance and we think straight away of all that we must do to prepare for Our Lord’s coming at Christmas most certainly, but also all the ways that he enters our lives day by day, and of course that key moment of his coming which is, on the one hand, his return at the end of time and, on the other, our own encounter with Christ our Lord and Judge in the moment of death. “Be prepared” Jesus encouraged us last week. Repent is John the Baptist’s urgent cry today.

Someone spoke to me during the week about sanctifying work. How do we do that? For us our work counts for a lot – it is an expression of our skills; we should take pride in our work. Our work provides for our needs: our income, it pays the rent, we buy food and clothes, we provide for our family. You and I should have a good name for our sense of duty, responsibility, our work ethic, trustworthiness; we take pride in a job well done, our honesty, as well as being a good coworker or team leader, our cheerfulness, kindness, understanding, patience, generosity. In all of this we live the gospel of the kingdom, we show others that the kingdom of heaven is near at hand.

Throughout Advent the Church celebrates the feast days of many saints. The season generally begins with the feast of the apostle St Andrew. New feasts added to the December calendar by Pope John Paul II include Our Lady of Guadalupe and her messenger St Juan Diego. Our Lady appeared in Mexico in 1531. Up until her appearance the Franciscan missionaries struggled to gain any converts from the South American people. From 1531 onwards the Gospel began to find a home in South America and Juan Diego’s Tilma or cloak bearing the image of Our Lady is still venerated at the Cathedral in Mexico City today.

The feast of the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady falls today, nine months before Our Lady's birthday on 8 September. The Immaculate Conception refers to Mary's own conception in the womb of her mother St Ann. Mary was conceived immaculate – i.e. without the stain or burden of Original Sin. Original Sin describes the rebellion of Adam and Eve, their pride, their declaration of independence from God. You and I inherited this from Adam and Eve by virtue of our conception and birth as human beings. Baptism rescued us from Original Sin but we still struggle and battle each day – we find prayer hard, we face moral struggles, we sin, we clash with one another, we're prone to loneliness, sadness and self-centeredness. Our Lady offers us hope – we see in her everything God created the human race to be – open to God, a pure heart, joyful and free, all holy, all lovely, all good. Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.