

### Advent 3 (B)

Yesterday afternoon Fr Philip and I put up in our house the Christmas tree. After Mass if you're walking down Bishop Crispian Way you should be able to see it as you walk past our house. It's a 6 ft tree, artificial but lifelike enough for me. Every year the same decorations get put on it and every year I worry that the lights will not work. Yesterday there was a brief moment when one set failed to come on but we soon found the dodgy bulb and now we have a tree festooned with lights.

Also out on display is Christmas crib. It belongs to Fr Philip and is rather beautiful. The figures are all in olive wood and the figure of Jesus is waiting out the remaining days til Christmas sitting snug in a box. Fr Philip's crib is a worthy successor to the one I had for many years until it sadly fell apart. That it fell apart was not a surprise because all the figures in it had begun life as toilet rolls. Individually they looked ridiculous; Mary was not able to stand up properly, Joseph looked seriously overweight and baby Jesus had enough clothes on him for an expedition to the North Pole. However, when properly assembled the result was a crib like none other. That crib of old, like the crib we have now, was a sign.

We need the sign of the crib. It points us in the right direction. Christmas and Easter are our two major opportunities to see what God has done for us. In acknowledging the marvels he has worked for us it is our responsibility to go tell others. A good start is made by displaying in our homes a Christmas crib. Lots of people have a tree, not everyone has a crib. In my opinion all Christians should have displayed in their home a Christmas crib. It is one of the signs we should be giving, a sign that points us and all who look at it in the right direction which is after all, the purpose of a sign. When a sign is missing people can get lost. If we can encourage others to look at our Christmas cribs and start asking questions then we must be ready with our answers. It is no good inviting in your next door neighbour so that they can comment on how beautiful are the figures in your crib if you cannot explain who those figures are or why they are there. This is why this Advent, as we prepare for Christmas, we are wise to spend time rediscovering our faith in God.

The readings proclaimed on this third Sunday of Advent urge us to do this. We hear them to appreciate afresh the wonder that God lives among us. Having appreciated this for ourselves we are invited to go tell others, even our next door neighbours who may have wondered where are we off to the same time every Sunday morning? For their benefit and ours we hear today the prophet Isaiah. He gives a reply to that still asked question: why bother with God?

When we are asked this or find ourselves asking it the prophet's words are ones to return to. Isaiah was keen to say that in the midst of all the difficulties of life, God is with us, not to

mock us or have a laugh at our misfortune. God is with us, proclaims Isaiah, 'making fresh things grow.' Isn't that beautiful? God is ready, says Isaiah, to liberate us from anything that holds us captive and to heal any heart that is broken. These words offer us encouragement for all those times when we feel lost or just messed up.

When we believe what Isaiah's words are telling us we should feel like we want to say something by way of reply. And what better way than to sing the response to that first reading which is actually the song that Mary sang after the angel Gabriel had left her. In her song of praise, the Magnificat, Mary sings of what marvels the Lord has done for her. We need to cherish this too. It is at the heart of what we will soon celebrate at Christmas. What the Lord has done for her and for us all is to give us a Saviour.

The worrying thing is many of us stop at the crib and are not interested in the rest of the story. The gospel heard on this third Sunday of Advent encourages us to look ahead to what happened at the start of Our Saviour's public ministry. John the Baptist prepared the way for Christ pointing people in the right direction. He points us too to the adult Christ urging us to remember why Jesus came, why he died and why he rose from the dead. Only when we remember these things can we really celebrate Christ's birth. Perhaps this is why as we put up our Christmas cribs, and too our Christmas trees, we should take a good look around our home. John the Baptist is pointing us to another sign and one which should already be found in our home. A sign to be proud of for it is the most important of all Christian signs. It is the sign of the cross. Let us not forget the crib or the cross. Let us be unafraid to display them in our homes. They have the same purpose: of pointing us to the sign given by God, the sign that says: I am with you always.