

Advent 2 C St Stephen's 9.30 & 11 Mat 3: 1-4; Lk 3: 1-6
2.12.15

The Cherokee Indians have a creation story which tells how the Great Mystery gave a gift to each species of plant and tree, and, to determine which gift would be best for each, set up a competition. They were to stay awake and watch over the earth for seven nights.

All was well the first night but the second night a few found it difficult to stay awake, and so it was each night until the seventh, when the only trees and plants to be awake were the cedar, the spruce, the pine, the fir, the holly and the laurel. Their reward was the gift of remaining green through the winter, and they would be the guardians of the forest, giving shelter to the beast through the winter months. Ever since then, these were the only trees to remain green throughout the year.

And because of that these trees, and especially the holly, are extensively used in our Christmas decorations, with their promise of parties and good living, of presents and carol services, of singing about the baby Jesus who never cries, and Santa Claus. Sadly, these celebrations seem to have little to do with the birth of our Saviour. (It's alarming to note that in a recent survey, some 40% of people questioned didn't realise that Jesus live and walked on earth.)

St Luke opens today's gospel with a dose of reality as he sets the news of John's appearing in the political reality of his world. It was the time when Tiberias was Roman Emperor, a man becoming increasingly paranoid, and his representative in Judea, Pilate, and of the Herodians in power nearby. And in the religious sphere, it was ruled by Annas and Caiaphas.

But the scene immediately turns to the desert, bypassing the ordered world of political rule and religious custom and practice for the wilderness, a place of danger, of scarcity and of silence. It is here that the prophet calls the

people to repentance rather than in the market place or the Temple.

The challenge is between the call of the world offering power, wealth and fame, with the call of God, a call which is so often drowned out by the world and so could only be heard in the silence and wildness of the desert. This call was not to ease, but to repentance, which involved, as the prophet tells us, the refining and cleansing of the crucible and of fuller's soap.

If this is to happen, there has to be change. Just as in road building, where the hills are cut through and the valleys raised up bringing with it a radical alteration in the landscape, so if there is to be true repentance, there has to be a radical change in us if we are to be ready to greet the Lord when he comes.

This change is personal, and comes through our Baptism as we acknowledge our sins which separate us from God, and seek forgiveness and the new focus for our energies in discipleship.

The change is also for creation as it is brought back into relationship with God. Society, too, needs to find redemption, and not least the institutions which make up society. John Steinbeck in his book "The Grapes of Wrath" about sharecroppers in the southern USA, when drought hit the region, makes this clear. The banks foreclose on the debts and force the sharecroppers off the land. When they complain, the bailiff tells them: "The bank isn't like a man.....It is something else than man. It happens that every man in a bank hates what the bank does and yet the bank does it. The bank is something more than men, I tell you. It's the monster. Men made it but they can't control it." The institutions in society need redemption just as much as we do as individuals.

We know that as the gospel story unfolds repentance is not enough, but the gift of the Holy Spirit to strengthen and enable us to grow. Life, after all, is a journey

of development and growth – or it should be, as we move towards its moment of truth as we come face to face with the living God.

At the time, there were only a few who recognised the Advent of the King – John, Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and wise men, Simeon and Anna. But the Church has grown since then, and the gospel preached and lived, and God is continuing to work out his purpose in the world.

There are times, like our own, when this doesn't seem so obvious. As St Paul makes clear in the epistle, we are to live now in the expectation that all will be fulfilled when the Day of Christ comes.

St Paul underlines some of the characteristics of those who live in the expectation of the coming Kingdom for which we pray each time we say the Lord's Prayer. There is that sense of fellowship which our common life in faith brings, underpinned by a deep sense of joy. This not the superficial happiness which can pass so quickly, but an underlying reality which persists in spite of circumstances, and which sustained Paul even though he was in prison.

As we enjoy the fellowship of the Christian community, there should be a growth in knowledge and understanding which should help us to live out the gospel effectively day by day.

And in regard to the coming Christmas, the call is to simplicity in our celebrations at the birth of Jesus.

To sum up, perhaps the following says it all:

I'll walk beside you on the world's highway;
Your darkest night shall be as brightest day.
With my right hand to guide you, never fear,
For to thy Saviour's heart thou are most dear.

I'll stay beside you in the battle's strife;
'Tis I who bought your soul from death to life.

In peace and quiet or amid the din,
Be guided by my still small voice within.

I'll watch beside you when death's hour is near;
My constant presence will dispel all fear.
Lean hard upon me, trusting in my love;
I'll bear thee upwards to the realms above.

There'll come a happy time when wars shall cease
And nations dwell in harmony and peace.
We'll meet our loved ones; what a day 'twill be
When God himself gives glorious liberty.

Meanwhile, we should remember the prayer of St
Teresa:

Christ has no body now on earth but yours;
No hands but yours; no feet but yours;
Yours are the eyes
 through which he is to look out
 Christ's compassion to the world;
Yours are the feet
 through which he is to go about doing good;
Yours are the hands
 with which he is to bless us now.