Pastoral Letter
Second Sunday of Advent, 2025

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Now we have begun the Advent Season I write to you with some thoughts and words of encouragement as we prepare a way for the Lord. December can all too easily descend into a simple prelude to Christmas but in doing so we lose the rich opportunity the Church gives us to prepare for Jesus' birth. So let us use this time in prayerful anticipation to prepare the way.

Making straight a way for the Lord is how Isaiah puts this, a removal of obstacles and crooked turns so Jesus may enter our world all the more easily. In simple terms, we try to reflect in word and deed something of the truth we profess, to walk the talk as they say. To guide us on our Advent journey our readings today present us with two role models in this endeavour: the prophets Isaiah and John the Baptist. Then tomorrow we are given a third and pre-eminent model in Mary as we keep the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception and we have the Gospel reading of the Annunciation.

Looking first to Mary, we have a woman who was conceived without sin, her heart utterly open to the Lord, a heart unencumbered by the desires of an ego curved in on itself as she focused only on doing God's will. A new Eve, she unties the knot of disobedience made in Eden and prepares the way for the birth of her Son. In this way she is not just a model of faith but the perfect model of faith. As for the rest of us, although not immaculately conceived, we do have a sacred share in bringing Christ to birth in our world, in preparing his way. It is a divine calling, a difficult calling, but would not have been given to us were it not possible. So, we can take heart.

Openness to the Lord is fundamental to Advent, to the Christian life, yet the Lord can so easily go unnoticed, like a passing stranger. It could be in a moment of silence we hear His voice, so we need to seek silence out; in a time of prayer, so we need to

spend time in prayer; in receiving the Sacraments, so we need to avail ourselves of these great gifts of grace; and in a special way in the poor, and so we need to be aware of them and close to them. In other words, He shows Himself in quiet and mysterious places as well as in those who suffer a poverty of mind, body or spirit. Small wonder He can go unnoticed. At times our world may seem a dark place: the faltering economy, war and threats of war, religious persecution. Or perhaps it is a darkness in our own lives with daily struggles or living in the shadow of our own sin. But there is light, there is hope and Advent is a time for that hope to be nurtured by our openness to the Lord who is to come.

Earlier this week I heard the Oxford English Dictionary had chosen as its word of the year "rage bait": …. *Online content deliberately designed to elicit anger or outrage by being frustrating, provocative, or offensive, typically posted in order to increase traffic to or engagement with a particular web page or social media account.*

This came to mind when looking at today's first reading where Isaiah prophesies the Lord will: …. *strike the earth with the rod of his mouth and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked*.

Let's call this Isaiah's rage bait, his attempt to increase traffic to and engagement with his prophetic message. Man has turned away from God, God has hidden His face, and no human action can remedy that. On our own, we can no more change what is wrong with us and the world than we can lift ourselves from the ground with our own hands. The Lord must come. Only He can raise us. Our Advent cry, like that of Isaiah, should be: Please hurry, Lord! The world is in a mess! I am in a mess! Come and strike the earth! And our baptism calls us precisely to this, to be prophets, so we need to be alive and attentive to what is happening in the world around us, to interpret it, to engage with it while refusing to be inveigled into its dark side, resisting its temptations and pointing to the hope who is coming. That hope increases traffic.

Finally, there is John the Baptist. John stands at the margins, in the desert. He does so on purpose. He leaves behind the normal trappings of eating, drinking and being merry so he can enter a place of silence, of prayer, of preparation. He, too, strikes with his words and captures our attention. He makes an appeal: *Repent! Be washed clean!* We prepare by changing our hearts and asking the Lord to send the Saviour, the Promised One, because left to our own devices we fall, we are lost. John the Baptist is both a frightening figure yet a hopeful one. His humility and openness make him confess before Jesus that he is not worthy to untie his sandal straps yet on the other hand, his prophetic voice makes him bluntly declare before the Scribes and Pharisees in every age that they are… *a brood of vipers*.

Despite our own shortcomings, an openness and humility before the Lord allows him to increase and us to decrease, to find a voice of courage and hope that alone we cannot possess, the very essence of Advent.

Mary, Isaiah and John the Baptist help us shape our own Advent preparation:

Mary's faith in believing what the Angel Gabriel told her and the courage of her response.

- God our Father, increase our faith and our courage this Advent as we welcome your Son into our lives.

Isaiah, through his gift of reading the signs of the times and offering hope of a saviour in a fallen world:

- God the Son, the world is fallen and I am fallen. Rekindle hope in my heart that at your coming the world will be made new and I will be your servant.

John the Baptist, by heralding the truth out of season with single-minded devotion and love of the Lord.

- God the Holy Spirit, remind us of our baptismal call to profess the name of Jesus and help us grow in love for the One who is to come, Jesus our Saviour.

Holy Mary Mother of God…Pray for us.

With every good wish and prayers for a blessed Advent.

+Paul