

## Sermon: Advent 3

About a decade ago, DIY and gardening programmes seemed to be all the rage on national TV. Regardless of the time of day, or what channel one was watching, there would inevitably be some Gaelic presenter telling us how to decorate our homes or landscape our gardens. Thankfully the TV watchdog has finally got wise to this and the number of such programmes is now in decline. But although many found these programmes incessantly annoying, they did have a useful point to make. Week after week the designers would repeatedly urge anyone who was thinking of copying what they had seen in the programme to prepare, and prepare thoroughly. Excellent advice, as anyone who has decorated will I'm sure agree, as it is only through preparing thoroughly that one obtains good results.

But preparation doesn't just stop with DIY. Preparation is something that we all do day by day, whether it is when we are cooking or in making plans for the future. As many of you will know the Church places a high emphasis on preparation and indeed designates significant periods of time within the year for us to prepare for major festivals like Christmas and Easter. But the Church also helps us to prepare for other major events in our lives and the life of the Church. Before baptism and Confirmation the Church provides space for the candidates to prepare mentally and spiritually for the decision they are about to make. Before marriage, the Church provides religious instruction for the couple upon the sanctity of marriage and the commitment the couple is about to make. And every Sunday, during the service a period of time is set aside for us to prepare ourselves to meet with God through both the word and the table.

But this Advent the Church seems to be stressing the point of preparation even more than in previous years. For the second week running, the Gospel reading set has been concerned with John the Baptist, the great forerunner of Christ, and his message of preparing the way of the Lord. Advent is not only a period of time when we prepare for our annual celebrations of the birth and incarnation of our Lord and Saviour, but it is also a chance for us to prepare for Christ's second coming, when he will return in glory to establish his kingdom of justice and mercy.

This period of preparation has never been more important to us since we live in a truly cynical world. We live in a world where people of faith are mocked for their faith and values. We live in a world that cannot accept anything unless there is proof. We live in a world where experts are derided and 'armchair experts' are acclaimed. We live in a world that is no longer hopeful of and for the future but scared. We live in a world that is gripped by a desire to have lots of material possessions and a world that has lost the ability to believe that Christ will come again.

And yet, a little later in the service we will profess the mystery of our faith when we state "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again." Do we mean this?

In sharp contrast to today's society were the early Christian communities. In today's New Testament reading we hear how St Paul urged and encouraged the new followers in their belief. He did not need to convince them that Christ would come again. They were sure in that matter. They truly believed that Christ would come again and that his second-coming would be soon. Consequently, St Paul does not need to teach them the faith, but only aspects of how to live out one's faith.

In his letter he urges the Church to "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstance; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you, hold fast to that which is good and abstain from every form of evil."

Doubtlessly, these pragmatic guidelines would have helped the early Christian community in their mission of living out their faith whilst they awaited the return of the Lord. And consequently, it is possible that we might also be able to learn from these guidelines too.

So what does St Paul mean when he says "Rejoice always"? Well, exactly that. We have the greatest news, that we are loved by God so much that he sent his only Son to die for us. And not only that, but we are heirs of the Kingdom of Heaven through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. I think we can afford to rejoice.

Certainly things right now might be hard for us as we journey through this pandemic... we might be struggling with illness, we might be struggling with debt or family problems, but we have the greatest gift of all. The promise of eternal life.

And what does Paul mean when he says "Pray without ceasing"? On this I don't think he means that we should pray constantly as we would never get anything else done, but I do think he is reminding us of the importance of prayer. Prayer is often very low on a Christian's agenda, and yet it is so fundamental to our faith. Prayer is a way of asking God for help. It is a way of thanking God for everything, not to mention that it is a direct command from Jesus himself that we pray. It should be top of our agenda. It should be something that we do everyday, not just something we do when we gather for worship Sunday either physically or virtually.

And this is what I think St Paul is getting at. He is urging us to live lives that are not segregated. He is urging us to have complete lives where prayer is not just a part, but is in fact at the core of our beings. He is urging us to have prayer as something we cannot do without, rather than something which we do if we have time or if we remember. He is urging us to make time to pray. To make it a discipline. To make it instinctive. To make it part of us.

So as we prepare this Advent for the coming of Christ, let us spend time in prayer. Let us think and reflect upon where we stand in our journey of faith. Let us rejoice in the gift of Christ and the gift of life, light, and love he brings. Let us give thanks for all that we are and for all that we have, and all the blessings we enjoy each and every day. And let us pray for our hearts to be open to receive Christ this Christmas and to be able to show him in our lives.