



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title: **"The Profit of Prophets"**
Comment: *Fr Tyler suggests "(Ecclesiastical) New Year's" resolutions for Advent.*
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Readings for this Sunday:

Old Testament Isaiah 40: 1-11
Epistle 2 Peter 3:8-15a,18
Gospel Mark 1:1-8

I bring greetings from the Mother Church of our Anglican tradition, the Church of England. It was strange to be back in a country where our church is the majority one; where every town and village has an Anglican church often of very great age; and where when the newspapers talk about "the Church thinks", or "the bishops say", they're not talking about the Roman Catholics for a change! While I was there the new Archbishop of York was enthroned: the first African-born bishop to serve that 2nd most senior position in the Church of England in its 1,500-year history.

It was refreshing to talk to real, live churchpeople and not just the wire services about what is really going on. To listen to some sources, our Anglican world is falling apart and people are leaving our churches in droves. But the fact of the matter is that at least the Church of England seems to be alive and kicking and nowhere near the life-support that some claim. There is a spiritual vitality that I have never encountered before even in the Anglo-Catholic tradition that I was trained in. It was encouraging and also humbling to learn that Holy Trinity isn't the only place trying to hold onto sound teaching and active outreach. We are not alone, and we shouldn't give up on what we believe to worth fighting for and worth sharing.

Last week I was in the parish of St. Peter, Chorley: a church smaller than ours in numbers, but much bigger in size of building. There we celebrated the beginning of the new church year with the Advent hymns and the Advent wreath- just as you did here with Fr Dimanche and Fr Jacobson. Perhaps the biggest difference was that there we were struggling to keep warm in the snow while here, from all reports, the issue was keeping cool!

Someone once said that Advent was the most religious of seasons since there was nothing secular about it. Although I might suggest that Lent doesn't have a secular side, either, you've got to admit that one doesn't have 'Advent sales' in the department stores or take 'Advent holidays' away from work. On the other hand, it is also true that no other season in the Church year is so totally eclipsed as is Advent. For most people, especially in this country, Christmas has already come. We are already sick of the musak carols in the malls and have overdosed on pre-Christmas sales, metal trees and fake snow. It is very, very hard not to be sick of the whole thing by the time December 25 rolls around. I know that I get very "Scrooge like" towards the middle of the month.

And that is why Advent is important. It acts like a tonic to keep us from the "already's" of Christmas. Here in church it's "not yet": not yet Christmas, not yet Jesus' birthday celebration, not yet time to sing the carols. It is, in fact, a healthy time of year for another reason: it helps us to think about prophets. No, Bertie Ezra, our church treasurer, didn't put me up to say that: it's not that word. I'm talking about prophets with a 'p-h', not money that we make. (In fact, I hope you are aware that Holy Trinity doesn't *make* money at all!) But it needs *prophets* as much as it needs pledges- the kind that speaks for God and warns us about the implications of what we do.

Today's readings are prophetic and all speak on a very traditional theme: God's anger and God's appeasement. In the first reading, the prophet Isaiah is writing about the people of Israel; they've already had enough punishment and disappointment, and the fact that they are about due for some comfort. "Prepare the way of the Lord," cries the prophet. It is no earthly king that is being advertised but the rule of God himself in the land. No political ruler, no traditional Messiah will do: it

is God Almighty who will be both the one to subdue his enemies, and also lead his sheep with his lambs in his arms: quite a contrast to hear of both at the same time.

The Gospel reading speaks of another prophet, this time John the Baptist. He is saying that someone is following him. This isn't paranoia talking; it's the sense of expectation. Now, John was already a big name in Israel- the 1st century equivalent of a tele-evangelist with a large enough following that for some time it wasn't completely sure whether it would be he or Jesus himself who would be the top dog. John's words to his listeners refer to the same passages we heard in the Old Testament reading: "Prepare the way for God who is coming to rule his people." This time, though, it was going to work. This time, God himself would be coming to his people in the person of the true Messiah: Jesus of Nazareth. And thus we have a very traditional, Advent theme carried throughout our service today.

The secular New Year's on January 1 is traditionally a time for resolutions: some kept, most forgotten. The Advent New Year of the Church's calendar might also be a time for resolution, too: the resolution not to take things for granted and to be ready to respond when we are asked to act. If for nothing else, this brief season with its themes of watchfulness and expectation is refreshing and hopeful for us. There are good things to come far beyond Christmas: things that will surprise and delight us from a God of surprises and delight. But we need to develop the skills to recognize them when they do come, to pay attention to the voices of prophecy that God still sends us, and to be ready to do our part to make the paths straight and the rough places plain. I bring you personal assurance that we are not alone in our keeping awake: fellow Christians and fellow Anglicans are with us in watching for what God is doing in his world, and in our lives. Let's not let Him, or them, down.