



AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR
CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE
WISDOM FOR THE COMMON GOOD

2nd Sunday in Advent

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Rector

4 December 2022

Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72; Romans 15:4-9; Matthew 3:1-12

Listen at <https://soundcloud.com/frank-brennan-6/homily-41222>

In today's gospel for the second Sunday of Advent, John the Baptist goes in hard against the Pharisees and the Sadducees declaring, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?' Not very Christian you might say. During the week the Jesuit magazine America published their latest interview with Pope Francis. Being American, the interviewers were keen to get his view on the increasing polarisation in American society and in the American church. As he often does, Francis gave a response from left field:

'It is interesting to search for the roots of what is Catholic in the choices that Jesus made. Jesus had four possibilities: either to be a Pharisee, or to be a Sadducee, or to be an Essene, or to be a Zealot. These were the four parties, the four options at that time. And Jesus was not a Pharisee, nor a Sadducee, nor an Essene, nor a Zealot. He was something different. And if we look at the deviations in the history of the church we can see that they are always on the side of the Pharisees, of the Sadducees, of the Essenes, or the Zealots. Jesus went beyond all this by proposing the Beatitudes, which are also something different.'¹

Having vented his spleen, John the Baptist gives the Pharisees and Sadducees some very practical advice: 'Produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance', reminding them that every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. Those good fruits include truth, justice and the spirit of the Beatitudes.

On this second Sunday of Advent, we are reminded that polarisation and strong differences of opinion are part and parcel of life in church and in society. Despite John the Baptist's classification of them, the Pharisees and Sadducees were not all

¹ See <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2022/11/28/pope-francis-interview-america-244225>



bad. The challenge is to navigate through the white water and noise of difference, producing good fruit by living the spirit of the Beatitudes. Advent is a time of hope when we hold dear our vision of the better world to come, our plan for how our world now can be made more just and how we can all be more true even in the midst of conflict and division. With our Christian hope, we are not naïve. We know that justice and truth remain elusive for many people for much of the time. And this can occasion excruciating hurt and harm.

For example, we'll never know the truth of what went on between Brittany Higgins and Bruce Lehrmann, the two key parties in the rape trial which has had to be abandoned in Canberra following months of intense media scrutiny of both parties. There is now no way of the law doing its work. Justice will remain elusive for both of them. Human tragedies like this highlight that our yearning for truth and justice runs deep, and so often neither is to be found.

The prophet Isaiah speaks of a shoot that shall sprout from the stump of Jesse: The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him - a spirit of wisdom and of understanding, a spirit of counsel and of strength, a spirit of knowledge and of fear of the Lord.

Not by appearance shall he judge,
nor by hearsay shall he decide,
but he shall judge the poor with justice,
and decide aright for the land's afflicted.

During the week, Tom Holland the author of the celebrated book *Dominion* delivered the annual Theos Lecture in London. He was so bold to claim 'So profound has been the impact of Christianity on the development of Western civilisation that it has come to be hidden from view. We are all of us - Catholics, Protestants, Catholic atheists, Protestant atheists - goldfish swimming in Christian waters.' This would come as news to the many humanists and human rights activists who think they can get by without religious faith. For them, science, evidence and logic are always enough. For them, no need for leaps of faith or hope in something beyond their reach. But as Holland observes:

'The humanist assumption that atheism and liberalism go together is plainly just that: an assumption. It is not truth that science offers moralists, but a mirror. Racists identify it with racist values; liberals with liberal values. The primary dogma of humanism - "that morality is an intrinsic part of human nature based on understanding and a concern for others" - finds no more corroboration in science than did the dogma of the Nazis that anyone not fit for life should be



exterminated. The well-spring of humanist values lie not in reason, not in evidence-based thinking, but in history: the history of Christianity.²

That history of Christianity is of course intrinsically linked with the history of Judaism. Affirming the fundamental dignity of all human beings and committing to loving our neighbours as ourselves, it is important that we nurture our imaginations with fantastic images of the ideal world as does the prophet Isaiah in today's first reading:

The cow and the bear shall be neighbours,
together their young shall rest;
the lion shall eat hay like the ox.
The baby shall play by the cobra's den,
and the child lay his hand on the adder's lair.

Rabbi Tarfon who lived within decades of the destruction of the Temple said, 'It is not your responsibility to finish the work of perfecting the world, but you are not free to desist it either.' Let's pray for justice and truth especially in those situations of deep polarisation and abiding conflict. We await the coming of the Christ child who embodies the spirit of the Beatitudes allowing us to hold dear truth and justice in even the most trying of circumstances.

R. Justice shall flourish in his time, and fullness of peace for ever.
Justice shall flower in his days,
and profound peace, till the moon be no more.
May he rule from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth.

R. Justice shall flourish in his time, and fullness of peace for ever.

For he shall rescue the poor when he cries out,
and the afflicted when he has no one to help him.
He shall have pity for the lowly and the poor;
the lives of the poor he shall save.

R. Justice shall flourish in his time, and fullness of peace for ever.

² See <https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/comment/2022/11/24/theos-annual-lecture-2022-tom-holland>



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See <https://catholicoutlook.org/fr-franks-homily-4-december-2022/>