

Before Jesus was born the prophets had been preparing the people for many generations for his coming. We listen to those prophets, especially Isaiah, during Advent, so that we might deepen the same sense of waiting that they had. They were living through difficult times, and the prophet's message was designed to give them hope for a better future ahead of them. For us, Advent is about cultivating a longing for a better future, which is marked by the renewal of the world according to God's plan.

If we want to understand the message of the prophet Isaiah that we heard in the first reading, then we need to pay attention to the images he uses. It is as though he is a poet, and he wants to spark our imagination for what God will do; and deepen our longing for God's coming.

The first image in today's reading is of a tree stump. It seems that the tree stump is all that is left of what was once a mighty tree. Something has happened to devastate it. Normally, you would walk past it because it looks dead. But the prophet tells the people that if they look closely at it, they will see a single green shoot sprouting from the stump. This is the sign of new life. The prophet applies the image to the people themselves and their tribal line. They had been wiped out, but now they are coming back to life. There will be a new leader, who is filled with wisdom and insight, and who can make good decisions. He will know God and will do God's will. Not only will he rebuild the people, but he will rebuild them as a people who live in peace and harmony, a people who practice justice, a people who look out for each other and don't exploit each other. There will be no place among this people for the wicked or those who exploit others.

Then the prophet moves back into poetic mode and gives a new set of images. This time it is images of the animals. The image probably shocked them because it did not match their experience. The image distorted things. It was of the powerful animals not tearing the weaker animals apart. The wolf would live with the lamb, and the panther would lie down beside the baby goat. A newborn calf and a newborn lion would play together with a little child joining them. The child could play near spiders and not be harmed.

Of course, the prophet was not saying that this would literally happen, but each of these images pointed to the future that would come about when that new leader came, when that shoot sprang

from the dead stump. It is an image of a world that is characterised by peace and harmony. It is a world where the strong would care for the weak, where the weak would not live in fear. It is an image of a renewed people, a new community. It is reminiscent of what life was like at the creation of the world. Yet, it wasn't about returning to some past idyllic world. This was about the future; it was about a new creation.

Now, we know that Jesus is the one who fulfilled that prophecy. He even had a name for this new world. It is the kingdom of God. In his preaching and his miracles, he showed that God's kingdom has dawned. But that kingdom was like a mustard seed or leaven. It worked slowly to transform and bring growth. Even to our own time, God's kingdom continues to take root in the world.

This makes us quite different to the people that the prophet Isaiah was writing to. They were waiting for the Messiah to come. We know that he has come. But we also know from our own experience that the kingdom has not taken root in the hearts of everyone in this world. Just like the people in Isaiah's time we can still see a world marked by greed, selfishness, and violence. Our world still has some people who exploit others, particularly the weak and the vulnerable. We also know that we are struggling to live in harmony with the natural world, and that it is often exploited in such a way as to drive people into poverty. So, while Jesus has come and has inaugurated the kingdom of God, that kingdom is still taking shape. Like the people of Isaiah's time, we look to a future with hope. We have hope because Jesus died and was raised from the dead, thereby ushering in a new creation.

During Advent we cultivate this sense of longing and waiting. This is what John the Baptist called on those around him to do. His message, which is summed up in the call to repent, is also applicable to us. What this meant was that they should do what they needed to do in order to be ready for what God was doing in the world. In their case, this meant being ready to recognise Jesus as the Saviour of the world. For us, it means that, having accepted the message of Jesus, we now live as though that future he promised is already among us. If we live as people of the new creation, then we will be doing our part to make God's kingdom visible in the world.