

Advent 2 2025 Isaiah 11.1-10 and Matthew 3.1-12

Advent is a counter-cultural season. The current Zeitgeist calls for polarized, binary thinking. It insists that everything must be either/or, black or white, right or wrong. It refuses to believe that opposites can both be true at the same time. Advent pushes back against those assumptions. It teaches us to live in the holy tension of paradox. The world is broken, and yet God brings healing. Judgment is real, and yet grace is offered. The Kingdom is upon us, and yet it is still to come. Advent invites us to inhabit that space between the “already” and the “not yet,” where present reality and urgent hope meet.

This is not easy. We prefer clarity, certainty, and control. But Advent calls us to something deeper, a posture of waiting that is active, not passive, hopeful, yet honest about the darkness. It is the first of the great penitential seasons of the Church’s year, and it is a training ground for the ministry of reconciliation. Why? Because reconciliation lives in tension. It acknowledges wounds without denying them, and it dares to believe that healing is possible. It names division honestly, and still it works tirelessly for peace.

That is why Advent speaks so powerfully to our life here in the Cathedral and to the wider Community of the Cross of Nails. Healing the wounds of history, living with difference and celebrating diversity, and building a culture of justice and peace, these are profoundly counter-cultural commitments in a world that seems intent on tearing itself apart. They require courage, patience, and hope. They require us to live in the tension between what is and what shall be.

And yes, like millions of others, I love lighting Advent candles and embracing the hygge of the season. But let’s be clear: Advent is not a sentimental countdown to Christmas. It is prophetic preparation. It forms us to live faithfully in the space between promise and fulfilment, between Isaiah’s vision and John the Baptist’s warning.

Our readings this morning embody this tension. Isaiah whispers comfort: a shoot from the stump of Jesse, a Spirit-filled ruler, a world where wolves and lambs dwell together. Matthew shouts John’s challenge: a voice crying in the wilderness, “Repent!”, warning of axes at roots and unquenchable fire. One offers a vision of harmony and peace, the other demands urgent transformation. Both speak truth. Both belong to Advent.

Isaiah begins with the promise of healing, but that promise is spoken into a context of devastation. Chapter 11 is written against the backdrop of political collapse and spiritual despair. The once-glorious Davidic monarchy, the tree of Jesse, has been reduced to a stump. Why? Because corruption, injustice, idolatry, and failure to trust God had led to national ruin. The Assyrian empire had swept through the northern kingdom, and Judah was under threat. The royal line looked finished. The promises to David seemed dead.

And yet out of this devastation comes a new shoot. Out of the ruins of war, division, and corruption comes new life. A shoot is fragile, but it's full of promise; a promise that offers healing from the past, a way of life that enables seemingly incompatible creatures to live together, and a path to justice and peace. Isaiah's vision is not nostalgic; it is revolutionary. It does not invite us to pine for some imagined golden age or a simpler past. Nostalgia can be seductive, especially in times of uncertainty, but it is dangerous when it becomes an idol, when it fuels movements that seek to impose a narrow vision of faith or nationhood. In our own day, the rise of Christian nationalism often trades on this longing for a mythic past, holding it up as an ideal and excluding those who do not fit the mould. Isaiah will have none of that. His vision is not about going back; it is about God doing something new, reordering the world by righteousness, where predators and prey share the same pasture, and the earth is filled with the knowledge of God. Advent calls us to lean into that future, not retreat into nostalgia.

In contrast to the picture painted by Isaiah, Matthew jolts us awake. No one could ever describe John the Baptist as gentle. John calls the people to repentance because the Kingdom of Heaven is near, not as some kind of hair-shirt guilt trip, but as metanoia, a radical turning towards God. He warns the elite of his day that they cannot rest on their heritage. The Kingdom of God requires urgent action, and John uses strong imagery to get his point across. Axes, winnowing forks, and fire speak to the destructive consequences of complacency and hypocrisy. These are not idle threats; they are prophetic symbols of God's refining work. The axe at the root reminds us that fruitless trees, lives without justice, hearts without mercy, cannot stand forever. The winnowing fork speaks of separation: wheat from chaff, truth from pretence. And the fire? It is both judgment and purification, a consuming flame that burns away what is false so that what is true may endure. John's message is clear: Advent is not passive waiting; it is active preparation. It demands that we examine our lives, turn from what hinders God's reign, and bear the fruits of God's reconciling love.

In a polarized world, this means turning from fear and 'othering' towards radical hospitality. Repentance is not just personal; it's communal, a turning from exclusion to embrace. This matters profoundly in our current climate, where nostalgia for a so-called 'simpler past' is being weaponized. Nationalist movements that claim to '*put Christ back into Christmas*' often mask something more troubling: a desire to define who belongs and who does not, and to draw boundaries that Jesus never drew. When faith is co-opted by nationalism, it ceases to be good news for all and becomes a tool of division. Advent calls us to resist that temptation. The Kingdom of God does not look back. Remember the story of Lot's wife back in Genesis 19! It is about God doing something new, breaking down walls of hostility and gathering all people into a community of justice and peace. To repent, in John's sense, is to turn away from fear-driven exclusion and towards the radical hospitality of Christ, who welcomed tax collectors and zealots, Samaritans and Gentiles, and who calls us to do the same.

Isaiah's vision and John's warning converge in Christ, the shoot from Jesse's root and the one who ushers in the Kingdom of justice and peace. He comes to heal what is broken, to gather what is scattered, and to make peace where hostility reigns. That is the heart of the Gospel, and it is the heartbeat of the Community of the Cross of Nails.

We cannot change the past, but we can choose how we live with it. Our Cathedral stands as a witness to that truth. Out of the ashes of war came a commitment to forgiveness and rebuilding. Our story calls us to examine the wounds in our own lives, families, community and country. Advent calls us to name them honestly and to seek healing, not by erasing the past, but by allowing God to transform it. In the context of our current troubled world this is more important than ever. The saying 'if you don't heal your wounds, you'll bleed over others' can be written off as rather trite, but it contains a powerful truth that we ignore at our peril.

Isaiah imagines wolves and lambs sharing the same pasture, a vision of radical diversity and difference. In a world where fear of the "other" is weaponized, and the nationalist right's call to *"Put Christ Back into Christmas"* risks turning faith into a badge of exclusion, we are called to something different. Repentance means turning from fear-driven nationalism and toward the radical hospitality of Christ. Who are the people we struggle to welcome? Advent invites us to make space at the table for them.

Peace is not passive; it is active. It is built through justice, truth-telling, and courageous love. John's urgency reminds us that this work cannot wait. The axe is at the root. The winnowing fork is in hand. Advent asks us: what fruit will we bear? In our homes, workplaces, and neighbourhoods, and how will we embody Christ's peace? Perhaps by speaking words of reconciliation where there is bitterness, by advocating for those on the margins, and by refusing to join the chorus of division.

Advent is not about retreating into a sentimental past. It is about leaning into God's promised future, a future where justice rolls down like rivers, where enemies become neighbours, and where the earth is filled with the knowledge of God. So we are called to wait, not idly, but actively. We are called to prepare, not out of fear, but through faith. And we are called to live not in nostalgia, but in hope, as people of reconciliation in a fractured world.