

St Mary's Church, Dorchester, Sunday 7th December 2025 i.e. Second Sunday of Advent.

Isaiah 11:1-10

Romans 15:4-13

Matthew 3:1-12

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

John the Baptist watches many Pharisees and Sadducees, committed religious people, coming for baptism; and he says

You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. [Matthew 3:7-8]

And again John says

[E]very tree...that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. [v. 10]

If we've tried to live well, and if we're honest, we'll know that "bearing good fruit" is easier said than done. That's true even when all the conditions are right; and conditions feel especially difficult at the moment. What hope is there then for those of us who, like the Pharisees and Sadducees, have heard the call to change our lives, and want to do better? If we hope to be better people, what feeds our hope?

The Collect for the Second Sunday of Advent is printed on the front of the Pews News sheet that you were given as you came in. It's a prayer that God would supply our need. And "[w]hereas, through our sins and wickedness we are grievously hindered from running the race that is set before us," the prayer invites us to ask that "[God] may speedily help and deliver us." In other words, it's a prayer that God would help us be better people. John the Baptist says that, when Jesus comes, he will baptise people "with the Holy Spirit and with fire" [v. 11]. And so it is that, on this Second Sunday of Advent, our prayers and our readings invite us to ask for the help of the Holy Spirit. And God the Holy Spirit will help us become better people.

To put it slightly differently, our prayers and our readings today are all about the life of virtue. I've spoken here before about virtue. Our tradition defines virtue as the formation of good habits, habits that make us more humane – or perhaps just more human. The language of virtue is complex:

different cultures have prioritised different virtues, and as we discover more about human nature we're discovering more virtues (and vices) all the time. But there is surprising agreement across the ages and across cultures about the sorts of habits that make human thriving possible. That's what I'd like to talk about this morning.

It's worth giving a few examples of what we mean by virtue. A good representative list is what Western philosophers have called the “Cardinal virtues”. There are four: prudence, temperance, justice, and fortitude. (At this point I have to apologise to Jane, as I'm probably about to preempt her talk for the St John's Ambulance Carol Service later today. I learned from Jane last year that the Cardinal Virtues are especially valuable to the St John's Ambulance folks. Please do ask her why that is – it's fascinating.)

Prudence, temperance, justice and fortitude. Maybe it's difficult to imagine what these virtues look like in the abstract. So imagine for a moment that you're out and about, and you see a stranger collapsed on the pavement. Our tradition says that if you're a good person certain virtues will come into play. The virtue of justice teaches you to give people what you owe to them, and to give them the benefit of the doubt. The virtue of temperance means that however uncomfortable it might be to offer help, you will be willing to put your own preferences to one side when it's necessary. The virtue of fortitude or courage helps you overcome any fear or social anxiety you may feel about involving yourself in other people's business. And whether you're trained in first aid or not, the virtue of prudence will keep you from becoming just another victim as you enter what might be a risky situation.

Between them, these virtues help us first to understand what action that we need to take in any given situation, and second to follow through with that understanding. Notice that in the example I've given you the virtues are dynamic: they push and pull us, and somewhere in that tension we find the right path. Prudence without courage would be selfishness; courage without prudence would be recklessness – we need both in some measure. The other thing to say here is that virtues are formed and practised in community, so in talking about virtue we assume that there are other people around us who are also trying to learn how to do all of this. The language of virtue assumes that there is such a thing as the “common good”, and that we can only work it out together.

Being able to list the virtues is only a first step, of course. In an ideal world we would clearly understand what sorts of actions were good, and we would be able to desire that good naturally. But you may have noticed that often things get in the way. The Pharisees and Sadducees clearly saw the

need for repentance, for a change of heart; and Cranmer's prayer for today talks about how “our sins and wickedness” distract us from the good. That's the negative side of things; but it isn't whole picture. “Sins and wickedness” are obviously problems for us; what makes things more complex is that sometimes the things that distract us are good. We might be distracted by joy or affection – things which are not bad in themselves, but just not very helpful in pressurised situations.

God doesn't leave us alone to wrestle with all of this. To help us make a good start and to keep us on a good path, the Holy Spirit gives us seven necessary gifts, each of which get to work on the things that might distract us – good, bad and indifferent. Those seven gifts are listed in today's Old Testament reading, from Isaiah chapter eleven. Isaiah says that the Spirit of the Lord is

the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
[and] delight... in the fear of the Lord. [Isaiah 11:2-3]

Since the medieval period Christian theologians have seen this list not just as a description of the character of the Messiah – although it clearly is that – but also as a template for how the Holy Spirit works in our complex moral lives. So Gregory the Great says

the Holy Spirit gives wisdom against folly, understanding against dullness, counsel against rashness, fortitude against fears, knowledge against ignorance, piety against hardness of our heart, and fear against pride. [cit. in Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*, I.II.62.2]

Tradition calls these promptings the “seven gifts of the Holy Spirit”. They are necessary for us, for our salvation, because without them we are incapable of becoming the people God calls us to be. They are gifts because they come from God and not from us; we can ask God to give them to us, and he will respond. You'll also notice that they are the sorts of things that are habit-forming: that makes sense if the purpose is to help us grow in virtue, habits which are good. But because they are habit-forming they are different from other things that Scripture sometimes calls “gifts of the Holy Spirit” – things like prophesy, which comes and goes.

Sometimes we can't reason our way into being good. We get distracted by all sorts of things, positive, negative, and indifferent. In all those cases, we need the Holy Spirit to help us get on the right track; and so we need a gift. [cf. ST, I.II.62.2]

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Advent is a strange time. I find that most of my preaching in Advent is usually me trying to keep ahold of Jesus Christ: not just the baby in the manger, but the Judge who will come again. (Hopefully soon.)

The readings this Sunday surprised me. They have been a welcome reminder of the Trinity: not just the Father who ordains good for us by sending his Son; not just the Son, who came to us a long time ago in flesh, and will return to be our Judge and King; but also the Holy Spirit who, even now, is alongside us, enabling us to respond. As St Paul says:

The root of Jesse shall come,
the one who rises to rule the Gentiles;
in him the Gentiles shall hope.

[So] may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. [Romans 15:12-13]

Amen.