

**May I speak in the name of the living God, Father,  
Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.**

In our Gospel reading today, we hear the Prophet Isaiah foretelling the coming of Christ, who would be born of the house and lineage of David, from the branch of Jesse.

The prophet proclaimed that God would raise up a wise and just leader, who would bring to his people and the peoples of the world, wisdom, understanding, justice, righteousness and peace. Through his leadership, there would be a dramatic change in the attitudes of the world, old enmities would cease and people would learn to live in peace with one another. The wolf would lie down with the lamb, the cow will feed with the bear, the young child will play near the hole of the cobra – all without fear.

What a wonderful vision of a world transformed!

Elsewhere in the book of the Prophet Isaiah, we hear his call to prepare the way for the coming of this time of peace and justice:-

*“Prepare the way for the Lord... make a straight highway for our God.”*

When we go on a long journey, we all know that a straight road shortens the journey. The Romans understood well the advantages of straight roads – not only was journeying time quicker, but there were fewer opportunities to be ambushed on the way – if the road ahead could be clearly seen from a great distance.

In more recent times, many narrow and twisty country lanes have been straightened – to improve safety and speed of travel with increasing volumes of traffic.

As a young teenager, I remember seeing the M25 being built around my home town of Leatherhead – it looked like a wide and straight highway, cutting through the green fields on either side – ready and waiting for the traffic which would soon come to fill it.

But of course, this is not what Isaiah was talking about when he said: “Make a straight highway for the Lord.”

The highway to be made straight is our way of life. It is not so much the Lord who needs the straight path, but us. And it is not so much a straight path, as a straight attitude that we need.

Here, the word straight, stands for honesty and right living. People are often urged to straighten themselves out. By that we mean that the person concerned needs to reform their behaviour. When someone comes out of prison, there is the hope that they will go straight – stay on the right side of the law, behave in a way different to the ways which led them into crime.

Advent gives us all a chance to look at our lives. To reflect on the path we are following.

Sticking with the road analogy: are there potholes or barriers that we need to be aware of – which prevent us from following most effectively the way of God?

Are there gaps or holes in our loving and caring for others? In the lead up to Christmas, we are made very aware of the needs of those around us.

Between now and Christmas, many of us will receive in the post appeals for support from organisations such as Shelter, the Salvation Army and Crisis at Christmas – all of which have over many years done much to help homeless people on our streets.

Individually, we cannot give financial support to all of these good causes, however much we might wish too, however, heart rending the pictures or stories that accompany the appeal for help.

However, we can each reflect on these appeals for help and support them through prayer – if not by financial giving. All of the organisations say again and again, how important prayer support is – that it is just as important, if not more important than the giving of money. For it is through prayer that God stirs the hearts of those who do have the money and resources that are needed in these situations, and strengthens those who work with them.

Alongside these national and international appeals for help, there are many who each of us will know, who are in need of love and care in the run up to Christmas.

For many, Christmas is a difficult time – for most it is a time for being together with families and friends. For some, however, it will be a time of separation – through illness, through the breakdown of relationships, through geographical location, or through bereavement.

As we look for gaps or holes in our loving and caring, we can think about the friends and neighbours around us.

- Will they be on their own at Christmas?
- Are they finding it hard to get out and make all the necessary preparations for Christmas?
- Are there ways in which we can help to bring love and affection into their lives, that will give them hope and comfort in their situation?

Now is the time to look ahead, along the road to Christmas, and see if there are holes or gaps which we can fill in a very practical and positive way.

An invitation to share a meal, or time at home with the family - the sharing of hospitality can make a real difference in someone's life.

The offer of help with shopping, or a lift to or from church for one of the special Christmas services, might seem something very small, but for someone who is on their own and struggling, it can make what seems impossible, possible.

For some, a *personal* invitation from a friend or neighbour to come to a carol services or Christingle Service will be all that is needed to help them to feel wanted and valued.

As we look ahead to Christmas, as we “make straight the highway for the Lord,” there are then a number of very practical ways in which we can seek to fill potential gaps or holes in our loving and caring, and so enable God's love and light to travel more effectively into the life of our community.

Of course, all too often as we travel on our roads, we find road blocks. No Entry or Road Closed signs. This is usually due to necessary road works.

However necessary, it can of course be really frustrating, and a journey which should have taken an hour, might take twice as long.

Advent gives us an opportunity as we reflect on the highway of our lives, to see whether there are any blocks or barriers to God's love working in and through us.

We can all put up barriers from time to time in our relationships with each other, for a whole host of different reasons - fear, suspicion, misunderstanding, anger, guilt.

These barriers can be very real, very tangible, and make it difficult for us to communicate with each other.

People may be living next door to one another, yet because of a hostile or unforgiving attitude, they may be unable to travel the few yards that separate them. We all know that such barriers can exist, not only between neighbours, but sometimes between family members.

Ultimately, it is only a change of attitude, a willingness to see things from the other person's perspective, a willingness to either seek or offer forgiveness, that can remove barriers such as these.

It is exactly the same in our relationship with God. There are times when we do things in our lives that we regret, and these can put up tremendous barriers of guilt, which make it very difficult for God to break through into the situation.

There are times when we sense that God may be calling us to change a particular aspect of our lives – a way of behaving, a way of relating to others, or possibly even a change of career. Sometimes, this causes us to put up barriers – we might be afraid of the implications. Afraid of what family, or friends or neighbours might think. The easiest response is to put up a barrier, to refuse to listen, to want to shut God out, for fear of where it might lead.

Then there are times when we allow anger or frustration in a situation to close our hearts to God's presence alongside us, and we determine to go it alone and do things our own way without God.

During Advent, then, we have an opportunity to ask ourselves the question: "are there any No Entry or Road Closed signs in our relationship with God?"

During the remaining days of Advent, there is an opportunity to do something about these barriers, if we are prepared to make the time and space to come before God in prayer.

We can do this in the knowledge that the only barriers there, are ones which we have put in place. For through his Son, Jesus Christ, God breaks down every barrier and opens the gate of glory to all who would follow his pathway of love.