



Week 2

At the beginning of the last century, William James told his Harvard students: 'If something is true it makes a difference; if it makes no difference then it likely isn't true.' If we really believe that God came among us as one of us, if we truly celebrate the birth of God the Son (the mystery of the Incarnation), then it must make a difference.

It certainly made a difference to Paul. We know him as sceptic and persecutor turned believer and loyal follower, persecuted in turn for setting up Christian communities in the ancient Near East. Imprisonment was not infrequent for Paul, and it is from prison that he writes today's letter to the community in Philippi (in Macedonia, modern Greece). Yet the letter is one of joy and confidence. Paul invites the Philippians to prepare for the day of Christ by pulling together and praying together as a community of love, who will work out for themselves what is best. In an Ireland where CSO figures for 2012 show that 200,000 children are living in poverty and don't have enough to eat, Paul's message reminds us that the best way a community can survive is to pull together and pray together.

Like Paul, the prophet Baruch and John the Baptist also encourage us to imagine and prepare for a good future. This might be very difficult in an Ireland where almost every family is wondering how best to deal with the harsh reality of recession. All of today's writers were very familiar with hardship. Baruch was secretary and friend to the prophet Jeremiah. At the time of writing they had been taken from Jerusalem and were living in exile, never to return. Yet his too is a message of hope: Baruch asks people to take off the garment of affliction and distress and wrap up in the cloak of God's merciful love. Facing the future can sometimes take a change of mind and a change of heart.

John's courage and inspiration to proclaim the forgiveness of sins came to him in the wilderness. Far beyond the reaches of the Jordan, the gospel wilderness was a bleak and lonely place where a person was truly tested. Not known for its bounty or

shelter, it could push a person to their limits. Yet from this place John (and later Jesus) emerges a man of courage and determination, ready to face the reality of his own society and his responsibility for change. And he begins with this hugely hopeful message: repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

People with little hope settle for what is. Today's writers, who imagined a better future even though they were living in tough circumstances, encourage us to hope and work towards what might and should be.

Advent is characterised by long hours of winter darkness. The struggle between dark and light is dramatic in the winter months, and often too in our own lives. Yet the word of God came to John in the wilderness; Paul writes his letter of hope and confidence from prison. Spiritual clarity and the will to change often emerge out of darkness and uncertainty. This second week of Advent reflects on God's presence and promise of love especially in times of darkness, doubt and isolation, and on how we in turn can 'dress up' for the coming of the Christ child. [560]