Advent 2

**1st Reading**

A reading from the book of the prophet Baruch

Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem, and put on for ever the beauty of the glory from God. Put on the robe of the righteousness that comes from God; put on your head the diadem of the glory of the Everlasting; for God will show your splendour everywhere under heaven. For God will give you evermore the name, ‘Righteous Peace, Godly Glory’.

Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height; look towards the east,
and see your children gathered from west and east at the word of the Holy One,
rejoicing that God has remembered them. For they went out from you on foot,
led away by their enemies; but God will bring them back to you,
carried in glory, as on a royal throne.

For God has ordered that every high mountain and the everlasting hills be made low
and the valleys filled up, to make level ground, so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God.
The woods and every fragrant tree have shaded Israel at God’s command.
For God will lead Israel with joy, in the light of his glory, with the mercy and righteousness that come from him.

**2nd Reading**

A reading from the first letter of Paul to the Philippians

Mr brothers and sisters, I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God’s grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel.

For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

**Gospel Reading**

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah;

‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way of the Lord,
   make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
   and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
   and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” ’

I’m in our little car today….we call him Foxy….he is an old guy…a bit battered, but a great little car…..the roads around here are not too good for him though….he doesn’t have a lot of power and the suspension is from the days when horses were the real horse power on the roads….Talking of roads, foxy drives on our very own frenchgate and down church wynd…..I love the cobbles... foxy isn’t keen though.

We can see from the windows of this church how the Roads throughout our area have changed over time. At first horses pulling carts rode on rough roads through the grime of the towns and the harsh reality of the open countryside…the mud tracks…some dangerous…think of the story of Robert Willance….of his fall from the cliff in a place called willances leap….that was a convenient name for that part of the road….

Over the years, thankfully most roads were made better, eventually becoming two-lane paved roads, which improved travel between the towns. In some places, two lane roads are widened to four lanes, making driving faster…but arguably safer as there are no pedestrians. With better engineering over the years, roads often become smoother, more level, and straighter, and travel becomes easier en route to our final destinations.

I look at this road….named one of the worlds best driving roads and I ache to be behind the wheels of a fast car…or even better, sitting atop a can of petrol, strapped to two wheels….otherwise known as a motorbike.

Have you ever spent time watching the workers who construct roads….or even just spent a few minutes watching them repairing a pot hole! If you have, then that is a very rare sight indeed around these parts….. When I’ve watched the process, roads being ripped up, widened, levelled, and smoothed out. It takes a lot of time and effort, going over it again and again and again with a roller, until the road is right. But that is just the surface…the bits we will see….Most of the time is spent preparing the foundation for the actual road.

I often imagine myself as Michael cane in the Italian Job, driving around these roads….but I also think these twists and turns can mirror, not just our faith journey…but our journey through life.

In our Gospel text for today, the Gospel writer Luke reported that Isaiah had prophesied that Paths would be made straight. Valleys would be filled in. Mountains and hills would be levelled out. Rough ways would be made smooth. On these improved roads, travel would become easier en route to our final destination. The road that Isaiah described is the one we travel by faith to greet, the person who, in the green Howards prayer that we say every week, is the prince of peace, our Lord, Jesus.

In between the mountains, we can find ourselves in the low places. We come upon people who are depressed, lonely, in grief, in a prison sometimes of their own making, and in need. All need to be raised up— through our prayers, through our fellowship, through our neighbourly companionship. People fall into pits of poverty, holes of oppression, and swamps of enslavement…..all challenges that can face the road builders….. God calls us to fill those low places in and raise them up.

Given all the mountains and the low places in life that we cross through, it’s easy to see why Isaiah describes the way can be "crooked." It can be tempting to try to travel around the obstacles in the road, and so our road can twist and turn, and become a winding road. God also calls us to work at straightening the winding paths to God.

Isaiah says that the path is straight through the wilderness. Not some tame wilderness that looks pretty and safe. This wilderness is dangerous.

The wilderness where we are called to make this path is the wilderness in our own hearts, and our own lives.. The wilderness of our own self-centeredness. The wilderness of our attraction to other things that society says are important, instead of being attracted to the One True God who is coming in the person of the Baby Jesus. This is the wilderness where God wants us to forge a straight path-- a straight and level path between our hearts and God…..that is the real challenge, as no jcb or earth mover can help us with that job.

However, It’s here in the wilderness of our hearts that we truly come face to face with God, not in some mythic promised land in our past or future. As we seek to straighten this road between our hearts and God, we may have to face some unwelcome challenges and maybe even consider change. The plans for God’s new road may not match the road as it exists now. Or there may be no road there at all yet. We may have been putting off this major construction project. Sometimes it might look easier to just never begin this work.

The good news is that we don’t have to do all this work alone. God himself helps us as we work on this road. Jesus is already with us, giving us all we need to complete the work. Jesus makes our mountains of sin low. Jesus makes the unjustly rough places smooth.

No matter how rugged the wilderness of our hearts looks, God wants to build a road there. No matter how difficult the terrain, or how much special engineering might be necessary, God intends to build a highway there.

Even if we think the road looks fine, God has plans to improve it-– make it safer and faster and a more enjoyable ride. God wants us to have the best road.

God, by his own goodness, can build a road through our hearts. God brings the materials required, and God brings the skill to do the work. No matter how great the investment required, God has the resources and the patience to get the job done. No matter how impossible the task... with God all things are possible.