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| **Season of great expectations** |
| http://www.catholicireland.net/pages/images/transp.gif |
| *In this Advent homily, Celestine Cullen OSB explains that the new world promised in the liturgy of Advent is not a world without pain or conflict, but a world in which God's grace, power, and presence will be there to support and strengthen us.* |
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| Advent is the season of great expectations. There is at this time of year, both in the liturgy and in our daily round of work and relaxation, a sense of expectation – something exciting in the offing related for most of us to presents, parties, friends, home, Christmas lights, trees and shopping. This sense of expectation, of something to look forward to is not only real but besides, it is wholly right, indeed almost a biological imperative, if we are to keep our spirits up at this, the darkest, coldest and bleakest season of the year.  **Excessive optimism** Yet for all that, the Advent readings do appear to overreact, to sound a misleading melody of over expectation, of unrealistic and unrealisable hopes, of excessive optimism, leading us up the garden path, as it were, to a lotus land where no storms come: an age free of conflict and contradiction a world without struggles, disputes or trials of strength, as in Isaiah: 'Every valley will be filled in, Every mountain and hill will be laid low; winding ways will be straightened and rough roads made smooth; and all mankind shall see the salvation of God (Isaiah 40:4f).  And again: 'He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore (Is 2:4). The impression given is that all our problems will evaporate when the Messiah comes; from north to south and from east to west natural hazards will be no more; we shall live in a perfect, presumably computer-controlled world.  **Only slight differences** Yet the facts as we know them in history tell a different tale. We have celebrated 2000 Advents and 2000 Christmases and things have remained pretty much the same. There have admittedly been some fluctuations; fewer wars perhaps or fewer major natural disasters in one century than in another; less individual stress in one than another; less evident poverty, less emigration in our generation than in an earlier one; but the differences are slight; lives of quiet despair are still the order of the day in many parts of the world, and we rightly suspect that things will not change dramatically as we begin a new century, as time unfurls its mysterious mantle.  What then are we being promised by Isaiah or in other Advent readings? What will Christ the Messiah, the Wonderful One, the Father of the unfolding world (Is 9:6) bring us this year, if he is not going to bring our world peace, protection and freedom from want? 'Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth' is one of the key seasonal refrains: what can we expect if it is not to sound hollow and Handel's Messiah is to ring true?  It is hardly helpful nor indeed consoling, even if it is true, to opt for the eschatological solution, to say that when the curtain finally falls on the drama of history – at the end of time – then we shall know the prophet's promised peace. The texts seem to promise some more immediate relief, before the end of the long harrowing tale of man's efforts to find something – or someone other than God that might truly satisfy his human, his restless, his spirit-starved heart.  'O God come to our aid. O Lord make haste to help us' is the couplet with which we monks open our periods of public prayer. Is that plea to have no answer, as our days and years unfold? What about us? as Peter once asked the Lord; yes, indeed, what about us, as we confront life in our new century rather than await the end of the world? What is the Liturgy, what is God saying to us through the Scriptures about Christ?  **A changed self** 'When the Lord delivered Sion from bondage, it seemed like a dream' (Psalm 125). Is it a dream? No, but what we are promised is not a changed world, but the offer, the possibility of a changed 'me' to cope with an unchanged and largely unchangeable world. When John the Baptist calls on us to prepare a way for the Lord and assures us that one who is mightier than he is nigh and will baptize you with the Holy Spirit, he is not referring to Armageddon, but to the here and now, the countless centuries that seemingly must precede the end. His voice proclaims 'Behold the Lamb of God,' welcome Christ into your life. Unless you do, you will surely fail to cope with this strange, bewildering world as it unfolds, as your years unfold.  We are not promised perfect peace, but we are promised that with Christ we shall never be afraid. We are not redeemed from the human condition, but rather given the strength to endure it. We are not given a full understanding of life but simply the courage to live it. We are not even guaranteed the love of our husband, wife or children, but strangely strengthened to hold and win it. We are not freed from worry, but we are offered the possibility to letting tomorrow's worries belong to tomorrow, because they belong to the one who holds all things in his hand. When anyone is united to Christ, there is a new world (II Cor 5:17).  When the Baptist says 'follow him,' he is not saying that Christ will lead us into a never land of trouble free days. Rather he is saying, follow him and he will lead you safely through the minefield of every day; follow him and, like an expert surfer, you will ride the waves of all life's hazards and uncertainties.  **God will be there** Everything will not suddenly become easy at the end of Advent. There will not be a sudden blinding flash of light, nor in all likelihood an apocalyptic appearance in the heavens. Rather shall we be newly equipped with the tools to go on living in obscurity, in incomprehension, in doubt – yet in the firm hope, the unassailable conviction that God's grace, God's power, God's presence will be there to support us, to strengthen us and to comfort us.  The Advent/Christmas gift of God is an invitation to put our hand firmly in his, to go forth into the battle of life with renewed confidence and the certainty that we shall win all our battles, if we remain true to him.  It is all encapsulated in two verses of  Psalm 17:29f: 'You O Lord are my lamp, my God who lightens my darkness. With you I can break through any barrier, with my God I can scale any wall.'  That hope, that security, is the spring of the Christmas peace promised to his people on earth. |