

**“Prepare the way of the Lord,”**

*Lk 3:4 and Is 40:3*

In a corner of my hallway in the presbytery I have an Advent statue. It is not in the baroque style that someone who knows me well might expect perhaps, nonetheless I find it devotional. It depicts Our Blessed Lady heavy with child, and riding on a donkey which is being led by St Joseph. They have



just arrived in Bethlehem, and the innkeeper is holding up the flat of his palm, refusing the Holy Family admittance to his inn.

We are all so familiar with the Christmas story that perhaps we pass over even some of the most well known aspects of it without giving them much thought: “And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn,” (Lk 2:7). Very often, the focus of any meditation on this passage is on the busyness of Bethlehem that night, of how the Holy Family were just one family among many, of their sense of weariness having travelled so far, and of their lowliness in accepting such a humble alternative to comfortable accommodation.

But the innkeeper is not just standing in the background making a cameo appearance. Rather, his figure is the same size as that of St Joseph, and he is as much in the foreground as is St Joseph. He is clearly one of the major players in this particular moment, in this snapshot, of the Christmas story.

Spending time in front of this little scene, it has struck me forcibly that that innkeeper is meant to represent me. How many times have I held up my hand and refused entrance into my heart when Our Lord has been passing by? How often have I simply failed to make room for Him in the one place in my life where He most longs to dwell? How habitually have I forbidden Him to take up His abode in my heart, a place where He may lay His head and find rest?

And why have I so often denied my Lord a welcome? Sometimes I have felt too unworthy for Him to enter under my roof, too inadequate or sinful, or ashamed. Sometimes I have been too angry, and have not *wanted* my anger or my resentment or my jealousy to be assuaged and healed. After all, there can be something satisfying about holding on to anger, can't there? Sometimes I have been overcome with pain or anguish, and have not known *how* to make room for Him. All too often I have been intent on wallowing in the pleasure of some particular sin. And frequently I have simply been selfish, and have been thinking chiefly of myself rather than of my Lord or of my neighbour.

Whatever the motives behind that flattened palm, I have – many times – stood at the doorway of my own heart and refused entry to the One who has knocked at that door in search of a warm welcome.

But, you see, God does not demand that we *feel* worthy of His presence before He knocks at the door of our hearts. We may indeed feel too unworthy, or too ashamed, to receive Him, yet it will only be at His word, at His presence, that we can ever be healed.

And how are any of us to be rid of our anger or our temptations, of our pain or our wretchedness unless we first bid Him enter to pour the balm of His grace into our hearts and our minds? How are we to be purified of sin unless we make His merciful and just love welcome?

None of us deserve to receive Our Lord and Saviour into our hearts, but if He waited until we were fit to receive Him, who – in all these years – would ever have bid Him welcome except His Blessed Mother?

No, we must not wait until we are perfect before we prepare the way of the Lord. Advent is a time for devotions and for going to Confession, a time for wrapping around ourselves the cloak of the integrity of God, of putting on the robe of righteousness from God, a time for making straight the path that leads to our hearts, so that Our Lord may bestow upon us all the blessings of heaven that we cannot attain for ourselves. After all, if we could reach up to heaven and restore to ourselves the goodness and the purity, and the peace of heart, for which we all long, then there would have been no need for Him to come down to earth in the first place! But we cannot, and so He came down to us to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves..., if only we would let Him.

This Advent, don't be one of those who say, 'There is no room for you here.'