

# THE EMMAUS SERIES

## **2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent, Year A**

Isaiah 11:1-10

Romans 15:4-9

Matthew 3:1-12

### **Prepare a way for the Lord**

Today's liturgy brings together readings from very different backgrounds, as it gives expression to the Advent message of hope.

The prophetic vision of Isaiah reflects his familiarity with the king's court in a period of dramatic international developments in the region. He links the fulfillment of God's designs for the nation with the rule of a new David (Jesse is the father of David) whose rule will contrast with that of many of David's unworthy successors. He will be filled with the gifts of the 'spirit of the Lord', ruling with wisdom and integrity, and showing himself a forthright champion of the oppressed and the poor of the land. The peace established by his rule is graphically portrayed as like a new paradise - as the whole country is 'filled with the knowledge of the Lord' and lives according to God's ways. For those who know the blessings brought by the true 'Son of David', the themes of the Christmas celebration that awaits us at the end of our Advent preparation are not difficult to recognise.

The gospel reading from Matthew reminds us that our hope in the promises of God brings with it a challenge. John the Baptist was honoured by Jesus as the embodiment of the prophetic tradition of Israel. It has been pointed out that, in the cultural traditions of the world, there is no parallel to old Israel's acknowledgment of its failures before the God of the covenant. And it was the prophets who – like a conscience of the nation – challenged the people and their leaders with their unfaithfulness. Scholars tell us that Matthew's gospel – from which our readings for the coming year will come – was produced by an early Christian community in dispute with former Jewish associates who cannot accept the claims of Christian faith. This helps us to understand the sharp edge given to the words of Jesus against „the scribes and Pharisees“ (see ch.23), and the strong words of the Baptist in today's gospel. Jesus was impatient with the complacent exclusivism of these groups. We know, from contemporary records, that they tended to believe that being „children of Abraham“ assured them a sharing in God's promises. John too challenges this complacency: 'Do not presume to tell yourselves, "We have Abraham for our father".' In the best prophet tradition, his language has a frightening intensity. The axe is already 'laid to the roots of the trees'; without their own 'good fruits' they will be lost.

Writing to the Romans, Paul has a similar message. Jewish converts must follow 'the example of Christ Jesus', in the tolerance and generosity they show, as they recognise in the Church's embracing of 'the pagans' what God foretold in the promises of 'the Scriptures'.

Our hope is boundless in its expectations; but we must play our part in the generous designs of God.

John Thornhill sm