

Looking out of the window above my desk at home, when praying for inspiration, there is a large tree that looks quite sorry for itself. The tree seems to be a skeleton of its former self; only a few months ago it was in full bloom. All of its leaves have fallen off leaving only branches and twigs. This is in stark contrast to the magnificent tree that stands in front of the quad at this time of year – an evergreen decorated with lights, a tree anticipating Christmas. It looks full of life, even though of course its roots were cut when it was taken from the ground with an axe.

I don't want to talk about Christmas trees today – they do a splendid job of lifting the spirits – but I do want to talk about what is left behind when they are cut down. Because for our homes and school to feel festive, something else has to be sacrificed. What is left behind in the forest? Stumps. Not a reference to the cricket down under – too soon for that – but stumps, as in what remains when a tree has been cut to the ground.

The first reading had a stump in it. The stump of Jesse. God's plan to save the world started with a stump. Jesse of Bethlehem was that stump. And Isaiah foretold that it would be so. Jesse was the father of David, whose youngest son became King David. The family were humble shepherds and farmers. Things had gotten so bad, that God started again. He started again from the ground, from those working the land with honesty and integrity; the fruit had been lost to self-indulgence since the garden of Eden. So God worked with what was left of his values on earth. The stump of Jesse led to the House of David. And the House of David produced a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.

I mentioned the tree seen from my desk window. There is a bigger and better window view here in the Abbey Church. The second form came to take a closer look at the window on Friday morning. I invite you to look to the east window and pray for inspiration. There is a tree in the stained glass too, a tree that is bright and beautiful all the year round. It is called a Jesse tree. Why is called that, a Jesse tree? Because at the lowest point of the tree, at the base of the window is Jesse of Bethlehem, the Lord's stump. He is lying down, and from his belly is the root of the family tree of Jesus Christ. Exactly what was promised in the first reading by Isaiah. *There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him.* Around the figures at the bottom of the window are branches winding their way upwards, and upwards. We see king David and king Solomon on the way. Then higher up, a flowering in Mary (the rose of Jesse), holding the baby Jesus, and either side of them, the two great voices of Advent we heard in the readings; the prophet Isaiah and John the Baptist, pointing to the baby who stands as a sign that God keeps his promises. At the top of the tree is the large figure of Christ in

glory. As we look at Jesus in the window, bring to your mind the psalm response today – *In his days shall justice flourish, and great peace for ever.*

Jesus whose birthday is soon (and who will come again to judge the living and the dead) – he is the fruitful branch, the flower of the stump of Jesse. He promises the deep peace of things being made right, a lasting healing that grows and holds. *Mild he lays his glory by, born that man no more may die, born to raise the sons of earth, born to give us second birth.*

That is what the Incarnation means. Rather than fix the world remotely from a heavenly control room, God entered it, taking on flesh and living a human experience, from womb to tomb. Incarnation sounds a bit like a ‘carnation’ flower; if you have a birthday in January, then the carnation is your birth flower. Throughout January the Church reflects on the incarnation, celebrating the Epiphany and the manifestation of a saviour. A fresh start is around the corner, as the stump of Jesse brought a fresh start for the people of God.

In the wintry last days of term, a fresh start might seem the last thing on our minds. If you are feeling worn out after a long term, then this message of hope is for you. Christ appears in the middle of the world’s tiredness and ours. That is why John the Baptist appears in the Gospel today. He comes with urgency, to tell people to prepare, to clear a space where God wants to work. He puts it starkly: *Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees.* In other words, the moment is now. And then he adds: *Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.* In other words, when we see a festive fir, let it remind us to grow from the stump, and to make room for that growth. As St Augustine said, *God is always trying to give good things to us, but our hands are too full to receive them.* Put down the load your hands are carrying (even if only for this Mass) and open or close them in prayer.

If you arrive at the Christmas break feeling weary and spent, give thanks, because that is exactly the soil God likes to work with. From stumps. From tired ground. From ordinary lives. The branch has already grown. The flower has already appeared. And peace, real peace, is already on the way.

Let us pray. Lord, awaken our hearts to Your presence. In this season of waiting and hope, give us the courage to clear away the distractions and straighten the paths of our lives. Amen.

*Maranatha.* Come, Lord Jesus.