

The season of Advent, and the book of Isaiah

From the first Sunday in Advent this year until early January, the first readings at Mass are taken almost exclusively from the Book of Isaiah. In addition, many weekday readings during Advent are taken from Isaiah. Why does the Church concentrate so much on this one book of the Old Testament during Advent?

Main Themes in Advent

Perhaps we should start with the major themes of the Advent season. These are:

- Waiting together in expectation and hope for the Messiah and the Messianic Age.
- Having the ‘good news’ sustain our hope even when God’s promise is hidden from us and we are uncertain of the future.
- Experiencing Jesus’ coming as a time for joy, both while we wait and when we share the news of his imminent coming.
- Knowing Jesus comes to all nations, to each and every person.

Background to Isaiah

The writings in Isaiah are distinguished among the Old Testament books for their outstanding literary quality. The prophet was a poet who used vivid and powerful images and symbols to convey his message, and he manages to preach even uncomfortable messages in a style that makes them possible to digest. Isaiah is one of the longest books in the Old Testament, and scholars say it was brought to its final form over several centuries.

Why is the Book of Isaiah so important?

Pope Benedict XVI referred to Isaiah as ‘the prophet of Advent’. The renowned Australian theologian, Fr Gerald O’Collins SJ, calls the Book of Isaiah the ‘Fifth Gospel’ because so many gospel themes are foreshadowed in the words of this book.

These two statements highlight why the book of Isaiah is so prominent in the liturgies of Advent, as well as Christmas and Holy Week. In Isaiah’s prophecies, Christians have seen the foretelling of both the birth and the sufferings of Christ.

1. Isaiah is a prophet of hope and new beginnings. In particular, he speaks of the birth of a new king who will be a ‘Wonderful Counsellor’ and ‘Prince of Peace’.
2. Isaiah’s God is a God of mercy, comfort and consolation, much like the Father of whom Jesus spoke. He is a prophet of the compassion of God.
3. Isaiah proclaimed that the God of the Jews is also the God of all people. God’s mercy was to reach beyond the boundaries of Jerusalem and Judah to extend to all peoples in every corner of the earth.
4. Isaiah is a prophet of peace and justice. Harmony among all peoples and compassion for the poor are the hallmarks of God’s presence.

When he spoke of compassion, mercy, peace and justice, Jesus spoke out of a prophetic tradition that began with Isaiah. It is significant that in the gospel of Luke which we read during 2025, Jesus begins his ministry by reading a passage from the prophet Isaiah and applying the message to his own ministry (Luke 4:16-21).
