**Second Sunday of advent**

**Sandra Winton's Reflection at Arrowtown Mass and celebration of Mary Anna Baird's Golden Jubilee.**

Dear friends, people of this parish community, it is a delight for us, Mary Anna’s family, her Dominican sisters, and her friends, to be welcomed to join your Advent Sunday celebration today. Thank you, and thank you to you, Father Jaime, for welcoming this Dominican to speak on the readings. We Dominicans have a tradition of not choosing special readings for occasions but of simply going with the ordinary readings of the day and seeing what they have to say to us. But even if we had scoured the bible for passages for this jubilee day, I do not think we could have found readings more apt.

That begins with the first reading. Knowing Mary Anna as I do it was impossible to read it without hearing the wonderful music of Handel’s Messiah - in the old translation – ‘every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain.’ Living as we do in a country where massive earth-moving machines have carved out enormous dams, a whole lake where there was once a narrow rocky river, where roads curve through landscapes where only horses could pass, we can respond to the huge sweep and power of this image. It is an extraordinary message of hope.

But as I thought about it I found myself thinking, that’s all very well but it’s not how it feels a lot of the time. The fact is that we live our lives in the up and down of it all. There are moments when we are on the peaks (we marry our beloved, a child is born, we achieve an ambition or a dream, we feel the loving support of friends….) and there are times when we are truly in the darkest of valleys (those we love are suffering, our children struggle in their lives, relationships go pear-shaped, we struggle with addiction or depression, we feel alone in our sorrow). The road of life can feel rough, steep and rocky. Even this beautiful earth in which we delight in a place such as this, is struggling to stay alive and whole.

The prophet depicted a glorious return of the people from exile, streaming home along a broad highway, their arms full of the harvest. Living in our day the image conjured up is a different one: streams of desperate people, bringing only what they can carry, exhausted and afraid, escaping from war, or drought, poverty or rising seas. No one has smoothed their path.

So how are we to understand this reading on a day of jubilee and in the context of our lives. A jubilee marks a point in time – 50 years. At such points we stop and we look back. It is only as we look back that we can see the road we have travelled. It’s all there, Mary Anna - the fun, the music and laughter, the joys shared, the children in the classroom and their parents, the people in parishes, the other sisters, family, the people you have met on your travels through the Dominican world, the times when you feel you have built something and the times when you have felt it crumbling, the hopes, the disappointments… And it’s the same for all of us. As we look back over our lives there are times when we can see it. What seemed to be wandering track, appears now like a road traced by the finger of God, full of kindness and help, full of gratitude and grace. One of the joys of getting to live so long is that like people rising in a plane we came to see the shape of it all, that there was indeed a shape when at times there seemed to be none. Gloriously, hopefully, exiles that we are, we realise that we are being called home.

As we keep looking at this path there is another realisation. In our external lives the way can look rough and crooked. But if we look inside we can see that God has been at work. In the turns and climbs, the slipping and falling of our days, it is *we* whom God has been carving out. It is our mountains – of arrogance, of greed, of self-sufficiency that God has been levelling, our valleys - of despair, of failure and fear that have been filled, it is our crookedness that God has been straightening and our rough places that are softened *to make of us a road on which Jesus can walk our earth again.* I believe that this is what John the Baptist meant when he used this same passage in his call for moral and spiritual conversion to prepare the way of the Lord.

This is precisely the project of religious life, that life to which Mary Anna vowed herself 50 years ago.

This is the project of our Christian lives, to which we are recalled in Advent. In all that we live God is making of us people of Jesus, people who are learning to live as Jesus lived, loving, forgiving, being forgiven…falling, getting up, hoping. This is the invitation, the adventure of our lives. This is the call of these times when we may as earth’s people succumb to fear and self-interest or we may open our borders in unexpected reserves of charity.

And all of this is picked up in the words of the second reading we heard today. I speak it again for Mary Anna and for all of us: ‘I am quite certain that the One who began this work in you will complete it…when you will reach the perfect goodness which Jesus Christ produces in us….