



*"You are as Strong as the Cedars of Lebanon"*  
*- Pope Leo -*

**Reflection for the Third Sunday of Advent  
14 December 2025**

**Mgr Daniel McHugh**

**"Sorrow and sighing shall flee away." (Isaiah 35:10)**

A friend in the Maronite Catholic Community here in the Archdiocese shared with me a recording of Pope Leo's final words as he departed Lebanon this past week. Those who have watched the second part of the Pope's recent Apostolic Visit to Turkey and Lebanon will have been struck by the warmth of his welcome in both countries, and especially in Lebanon, which has the largest Catholic Community in the region. The Lebanese people have been under a lot of pressure, particularly with a huge immigrant population coming from war-torn Syria, not to mention the battles going on between extremists in the South and the Israeli Forces. Many of us recall stories of political corruption linked to the terrible loss of life in explosions in Beirut a few short years ago.

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In the midst of uncertainty about the future thousands and thousands of people, came out to greet Pope Leo praying that his presence might lead to the peace that they crave for the future. The Pope was clearly moved by the love and enthusiasm of the people. He said: “You are as strong as the Cedars that populate your mountains” and “as beautiful as the olive trees that grow in your plains”.

He spoke of his departure as not leaving each other “but moving forward together” – something he hoped they could bring to the whole of the Middle East, i.e., fraternity and commitment to peace, “war achieves nothing”. He concluded, “let us choose peace not just as a goal, but as a way.” He had received a sense of hope from all his encounters in Lebanon, and the Church was evidently encouraged to remain there and build together with all faiths for a better future.

In the context of the Advent Season, and the coming of Our Lord in our life today this touches on the theme of the Scriptures on this third Sunday where “the glory of Lebanon” is spoken of in Isaiah where the people will “see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God”. Isaiah speaks to the joy of the people gathered in hope with Pope Leo. Indeed Isaiah speaks to all of us who experience the coming of the Lord in our daily lives despite our concerns about a more pagan world: “Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who have an anxious heart, Be strong; fear not!”

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John the Baptist continues to be at the centre of the Gospel reading this Sunday: he is in prison now and hears of “the deeds of the Christ”. He sends his disciples to ask Jesus “Are you the one to come, or shall we look for another?” Jesus answers: “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up....” There are so many signs of the salvation that has come in Jesus. Pope Leo saw so many signs of the presence of the Lord in our days in Lebanon that he spoke of it as “a message” of hoping together. This encourages us too, in the light of the readings of this 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday, called Gaudete Sunday (meaning the Sunday of Rejoicing) to see the Lord among us – not only a past story of the coming of our Lord in Bethlehem, or a story of his coming again at the end of time – though both are a cause for rejoicing, but of this coming now in our time.

This coming, the fact that Christ is in our midst, is expressed in many ways in Church life in these days: one is the wonderful custom of Candlelight Carol Services and Processions at this time of year; they are an opportunity to express the joy and hope that Jesus the light of the world brings to us. They are an opportunity to draw in people from beyond the Church too: to share with many the way of life, the message that gives us hope even in the midst of difficult economic times.

There are other ways in which we express our joy at the hope that is in us too. One I have experienced personally is the celebration with candlelight on the

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Feast of St Lucy. The Church of Sante Maria in Monserrato is just down the road from the English College in Rome; it's known as the Spanish Church. There, on 13 December, her Feast Day, I once encountered the crowds in Church with lighted candles on her Feast Day. You could see in the faces of those present the joy of this celebration. The story is that this martyr known as "the saint of light" points the way to the light of Christ at Christmas, to overcome the darkness in our lives.

Pope Leo said a little while ago on the Feast of St Nicholas of Cusa: "We are in a blessed time: so many questions! The Church becomes an expert in humanity if it walks with humanity and has the echo of its questions in its heart.... We do not have the answers to all the questions. But we have Jesus. We follow Jesus. And so we hope for what we do not yet see."

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