

First Sunday of Advent

Well, first of all---in the spirit of this new Liturgical Year which begins today---I want to extend to all of you a very Happy New Church Year! Admittedly, the new Church year doesn't get nearly the same kind of attention as the beginning of the new calendar year which is still a little more than a month away---and which, for many people, can't come soon enough, anxious to "be done" with 2020. I doubt that anyone had a "New Church Year's Eve" party last evening, and there was no big hoopla, fireworks, or the dropping of any crystal balls to usher in this new Liturgical Year. But, in as unassuming a way that this new year may have begun, the fact remains that we are beginning what the Church so beautifully calls this new "Year of Grace". And so, while the rest of the world has now officially started telling us, thru "Black Friday", Small Business Saturday, and Cyber Monday sales that "Christmas is coming", Advent more calmly reminds us that Jesus is coming.

That's what "Advent" means---a special "coming". It comes from two Latin words: "ad", meaning "to" or "toward"; and "venire", meaning "to come". So, Advent refers to Jesus, the Son of God, "coming to" our world---"coming to" be one with the human race, bringing God's Love to all, for all time---"coming into" the hearts of each and every one of us. The Season of Advent also has its own liturgical "personality". Because Advent is a minor penitential season, with that message of our need to repent of our sins, and the need to change and prepare our hearts, the Liturgical color is violet. You may also have noticed that we omit the Gloria during Advent for the same reason. Advent is also the 2nd shortest of the Liturgical seasons, lasting only 4 weeks. The Advent Wreath is a special liturgical symbol, representing our anticipation of Jesus' coming into the world. With each week, we light another candle. And as our anticipation grows stronger, the light of the candles grows brighter until the day that Jesus, the Light of the World, is born.

The Scripture Readings for this Advent Season also focus our attention on making sure that we are prepared for the "coming" of Christ "to" us. And so the two major qualities that the Church wants us to focus on during this Advent Season, in terms of our own spiritual lives, is: 1) being vigilant, prepared and ready for the various ways that our Loving God comes to us into our world, most dramatically when God became "Emmanuel"---God with us, and ultimately when He comes again, at the end of all time, for the Final Judgment; and 2), the second spiritual quality is that of "waiting" patiently and joyfully to make sure that we don't miss the various ways that Jesus intends to come into our lives.

Today's Scripture Readings reflect those two spiritual qualities beautifully. We hear a lot during this Season from the Prophet Isaiah, who is often referred to as "the Advent Prophet" because so much of his message focuses on the "coming of the Day of the Lord". In today's passage, Isaiah is expressing his people's "laments" to God since they are feeling abandoned, and alone. Their precious Temple had been destroyed, and they had been forced out of their homeland and were living in exile in Babylon. And in a great cry of frustration, Isaiah pleads to God: "*Oh, that You would rend the heavens and come down, with the mountains quaking before You, while You wrought awesome deeds we could not hope for, such as they had not heard of from of old.*"

What Isaiah was asking was monumental---unthinkable---asking the God of all creation to come down to earth! And yet, that's exactly what God chose to do about 700 years later---when God "*rent*" the Heavens and "*came down*" in the most awesome way conceivable----more awesome than Isaiah could ever have imagined. For "in the fullness of time", God did "come down" to earth when His own Son, Jesus, was conceived in His mother Mary's womb by the power of the Holy Spirit, and born in the most unobtrusive way imaginable---unbeknownst to anyone, born in the middle of the night, in a stable, in the small little town of Bethlehem.

So what does this season of Advent prepare us for? Certainly, we are preparing for Christmas----and all the home-decorating, card-sending, gift-giving and carol-singing that goes with it; but most especially, we should be preparing to allow Jesus to be born anew in our hearts. In addition to that, the Season of Advent reminds us that we need to be prepared for that Second and Final Coming of Christ, at the end of all time. Just as last Sunday's Solemnity of Christ the King ended the Church Year with the Parable of the Final Judgment as the Gospel for our reflection, so today's Gospel Reading, beginning the new year, carries that same theme in the Parable Jesus told. It was about the Man, preparing to travel abroad, who gave each of his servants a responsibility to perform until he returns. Jesus' point in that Parable was simple: to "*Be watchful!*" and "*Be alert!*", and He concluded with: "*Watch out!*"

So that's the first Advent quality that we need to practice, not just in these 4 weeks, but always: to be vigilant, to be prepared, to be ready---to watch out; to not "sleep" our way through our lives.

But the second Advent quality is equally important: to "wait" patiently and joyfully for what God intends to bring into our lives. "Waiting" is not something that most of us are good at; patience is not an easy virtue to practice. Our society moves at a fast pace; the internet gives

us instant answers to any question; our meals can be microwaved in seconds as compared with hours; we'll do just about anything to avoid standing in lines, or waiting our turn. And yet, waiting is essential, and if we rush through life at too fast a pace, there's a good chance we're going to miss what's really important along the way.

These last 9 months of this worldwide Pandemic, during which so many people have died, and we---both to avoid getting sick but also to avoid spreading the virus to others, have been restricted in so many aspects of our lives----these 9 months have probably been the longest 9 months ever. And, sadly, it's not over yet. But, there's more to be done than to just wish it away. As we are waiting for it to be over, we also need to be aware of what we are learning throughout the "waiting". What have we learned about ourselves; what have we learned about our families; what have we learned about human nature, and the human spirit?!

The "New York Times" published an "op ed" in yesterday's edition by an unlikely, but very well known, author; it was an "op-ed" by Pope Francis entitled: "A Crisis reveals What is in Our Hearts". It's an excellent article, well worth your time if you can find it. It's taken from a new book that Pope Francis is publishing entitled "*Let Us Dream: the Path to a Better Future*". In this article, Pope Francis wrote this: "There are moments in life that can be ripe for change and conversion. Each of us has had our own "stoppage", or if we haven't yet, we will someday: illness, the failure of a marriage or a business, some great disappointment or betrayal. As in the COVID-19 lockdown, those moments generate a tension, a crisis that reveals what is in our hearts." And then Pope Francis writes: "In every personal 'Covid', so to speak, in every 'stoppage', what is revealed is (usually) what needs to change." In other words, this Pandemic--just like every other life experience---can give us insights into what our strengths are, and also where our weaknesses might lie. The important thing is: that we take the time to "change" what we can, and "grow" stronger as a result.

That exactly what Advent "waiting" asks us to do: to grow, learn, change, and draw closer to Christ and one another. As Pope Francis writes at the end of that article: "To come out of this Crisis better, we have to recover the knowledge that as a people we have a shared destination. This Pandemic has reminded us that no one is saved alone."

And besides patiently "waiting", we also need to "look forward to" what the Lord wants to bring to us---joyfully. Of course, there are lots of fears that we're facing, and many anxieties that are troubling all of us. This is not necessarily a "happy" time, nor a "pleasant" period in our lives. But JOY is a spiritual quality, different from the human emotion of happiness. Joy is one

of the Fruits of the Holy Spirit, and results from being both People of Faith and People of Hope--it's that internal sense that as we follow Jesus to the best of our ability in our lives, we also are confident that at some point, whether it's the end of our lives in this world, or the end of all time, we will meet Jesus Face-to-face, and live with Him in glory. That is why we can be people filled with JOY!

Advent is not just the time to think about the fact that Christmas is coming, and so we have only 4 weeks to get our gifts wrapped, and our cookies baked, and our homes decorated. That's part of it. But the bigger, and clearly more important message Advent conveys is for us to pay attention to what we hear Jesus tell us multiple times in today's Gospel: "*Be watchful! Be alert! Watch out!*" Why? Because Jesus is coming, and we do not want to miss Him.

Advent comes once a year, and it lasts barely four weeks. But, when we stop and think about it, our entire lives are like an "Advent". For as many years as God gives us to live in this world, we should try to live those years with an "Advent spirit"----1) being prepared for all the ways that the Lord comes to us in this life, and, to quote my own Episcopal motto, 2) living those years "*waiting in joyful hope*" for the coming of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Our Loving God is always with us. He has "*rent the heavens and come down*" to be One with us. And having done so in that most miraculous way on that first Christmas, He continues to "come down" to be with us as our Food and Drink at this Mass, and at every Mass, and through the grace of all the Sacraments.

That is what gives us the confidence to know that God will "*rend those heavens*" once more at the end of our lives, but then, He will do so to take us from here below to live with Him forever in Heaven. That's when our Advent will be completed, and our unending Eternal Life will begin.

We can be filled with Advent Hope and Joy because of what St. Paul told us in today's Second Reading: "*God is faithful, and by Him, you were called to fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*" May God's blessings be with us throughout this new Church Year, as we continue "*waiting in joyful hope*", now and always!