

Homily – 1st Sunday in Advent

Our readings today give us a few themes to explore as we begin this Advent season. Isaiah calls us to confess our sins and hope for better days. Paul's thanksgiving to God is upbeat about the future. Jesus warns us against complacency, for the end is coming sooner than we expect.

Advent invites reassessment of where our ways are leading us. This annual reminder that the world as we know it will one day end, sounds more appropriate as winter approaches, when daylight is short and darkness seems to be winning over the light. But the positive side of this is that a new Spring day is dawning over the horizon, when Christ will come again into our lives with power to save us.

Do you ever watch people at airports, waiting for loved ones to arrive from a flight? They often seem excited, eager for the first appearance of the familiar face, ready with the broad smile of greeting to embrace the returning traveller. We too wait for the Lord's coming with eagerness, because we long for his presence. The waiting is important because, during our life's pilgrimage, we are incomplete. At some deep level of our personhood we are in need, a need that only God can fill.

This is a time to open our hearts and invite the Lord to bring us to completion. We begin Advent, yearning for his coming. The whirling, withered leaves of autumn are a familiar scene these past few weeks. Isaiah proposes the dead leaves as symbols of all that is dried up and withered in our lives. But he also calls us to look for a better day. God is still in charge of creation, and our personal lives are under his loving care. We pray this Advent, "Come, Lord Jesus," and make our own the words of the psalm, "Visit this vine and protect it, the vine your right hand has chosen." It is a central understanding of our faith that the Lord never abandons His people.

Back to the people at airports waiting for loved ones to arrive. It is an alert, active waiting – keeping an eye on the time. In today's gospel Jesus says, "Be on your guard, stay awake." He wants us to focus on our task here and now. We are to grow more mature in our relationship with others and with him, paying attention to prayer, and living with his message in our hearts. That's what waiting for him should be like.

But Advent is more than just staying alert because Advent is the season of hope. The promise of the prophets will be fulfilled. The Messiah will come to return the world to God's original plan. Our thirst for the Messiah will be quenched by the celebration of his birth and life within our own lives. We wait. We watch. We prepare to celebrate.

To the extent that we do this well, to the extent that our lives are a celebration of the presence of Christ in the world, to that extent, our entire lives are a celebration of Christmas. What Advent is saying is we must live now with faith, we must live now with love. And what drives us on to live with faith and to share love is hope. Hope is the great virtue.

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I'd like to read to you a poem by Charles Péguy. I'm told that it is seventy-six pages long but I will just read you one small bit.

*I am, says God, master of the three virtues: Faith, Charity and Hope.
Faith is like a faithful wife.
Charity is the ardent mother.
But Hope is a little girl
I am, says God, the master of virtues.
Faith is she who remains steadfast through centuries and centuries.
Love is she who gives herself during centuries and centuries.
But my little Hope is she who rises every morning.
I am, says God, the Lord of virtues.
Faith is she who remains firm and strong.
Charity is she who unbends during centuries and centuries.
But my little Hope is she who every morning wishes me good day."*

It is true that the most important of all things that holds us close to God is hope because no one can live without it.

And so difficult times make us aware that of these three virtues, the least known, the least talked about, the one that we always feel is like a little child, is the one who feeds Faith, and the one who gives joy to Love.

And so it is the little girl that we ask God to grace us with — the humble little girl who says every morning is a new day. She calls Faith good morning and calls Love to the morning.

This is what it means to prepare for Christmas: To help each other as we go through these difficult times, but with hope in our hearts. A hope that feeds the deep faith that we must recommit ourselves to our friends and to people and to the world in which God is. And, also, that we commit ourselves to reaching out in love and caring and compassion. And, most of all, with a joyful, light heart, because Hope is a little girl who gets up every morning and wishes us good day.