

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT (C)

Jeremiah 33: 14-16 I Thessalonians 3: 12-4:2 Luke 21: 25-28, 34-36

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

We are at the beginning of a new church year---another Advent comes around. And soon we will turn to decorating our homes and places of worship with candles, wreathes, ribbons and crib scenes. Why do we do this, year after year? Maybe we need these reminders to help us look beyond the present harsh realities of our world. We do not want to ignore reality, we just don't want to think that what we are calling "reality" is all there is. We need to recognize and remind ourselves what our lives are all about---where we came from and where we are going. The Advent season with its stories of hope and expectation gives focus, so we can see the reality beneath the present moment and the reality that awaits us---the real world of God's reign, once and for all established.

Thomas Merton once asked our question: "Is Advent hope or delusion?" I like his response:

The certainty of Christian hope lies beyond passion and beyond knowledge. Therefore, we must sometimes expect our hope to come in conflict with darkness, desperation and ignorance. Therefore, too, we must remember that Christian optimism is not a perpetual sense of euphoria, and indefectible comfort in whose presence neither anguish nor tragedy can possibly exist. We must not strive to maintain a climate of optimism by the mere suppression of tragic realities. Christian optimism lies in a hope of victory that transcends all tragedy: a victory in which we pass beyond tragedy to glory with Christ crucified and risen. (Thomas Merton in, Seasons of Celebration.)

If a private survey I have made is any indication, this season of Advent is a favorite season for many. What do we share and sense in Advent? Perhaps Merton is right, we share in this holy season a Christian optimism that "lies in a hope of victory."

The first Advent has happened for us. In the Jeremiah reading we hear the promise God made to Israel--- and kept. The first reading reminds us, as the scriptures always do: God starts the process that leads to our betterment, our healing. God took the initiative and made a promise to us; God would raise up a "righteous

branch (a "just shoot") from the line of David. Why does God make promises like that? In the light of our unfaithfulness, why does God continue to promise our well being? Because God, like a loving parent, wants good for us. A parent leans over the crib of a newborn infant and makes a silent pledge; "I will give you everything I can to make your life safe, full and meaningful." God has done the same for us.

What God has promised, God has fulfilled in Jesus. Thus, Jeremiah exclaims, "the Lord our justice. God has lived up to God's promises and God's word can be trusted for God is righteous (just). Every time I hear that word righteous, it reminds me of the prison lingo I used to hear in the yards at San Quentin. When an inmate referred to another inmate, guard or even the chaplain, as righteous, it meant that person's word was trustworthy. People who were righteous kept the good promises they made. God is righteous too; God promised to do good for us and has. Advent begins with that reminder. God is trustworthy and what God began will be completed. And so, we await the Second Advent, the coming that Jesus speaks of in the Gospel--he will return.

Jesus expected that the signs he mentions in today's Gospel would be fulfilled soon, even before the disciples died. God's timetable is not in synch with our own. Though we need to adjust our expectations, we are not excused from keeping vigilant and being diligent. We need, Jesus tells us today, to be on guard. The disaster Jesus speaks of had not yet happened in his lifetime. But the community Luke wrote to had known the disaster, the old ways were gone. The temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed, the people dispersed; there was a major rupture between what they had known and what was true for them at the writing of this Gospel. But what they also knew was, with the past entirely altered, God was still faithful. Jesus' life, death and resurrection had been testimony to God's fidelity through earth shaking events. In the midst of the disaster experienced by Luke's community, these words of Jesus would be a reassurance--Jesus knew what was coming and his life and the words he spoke to his disciples would enable them to hold strong.

In our life experiences, at least some of us feel that the expectation of an event is greater than the event itself. We prepare for a holiday or special occasion and there seems to be more thrill and excitement prior to the actual celebration. Once it's over, we feel it slipped by too quickly and it wasn't all we were anticipating. Jesus is calling his disciples to look ahead and anticipate the ending of one age and

the beginning of a new and permanent one. Advent expectation will not yield to such a disappointment.

Most people do not have this vision of a future when, we will “stand before the Son of Man” at his return. Are we being naive? Will that moment, if it even happens, be another disappointment as other anticipated events? Jesus is inviting us to another vision of the future, one very different from the prevailing perceptions of the world that surrounds us. He is saying that at the very moment of the greatest disaster--- he enters the scene. God doesn’t will disaster. But it is at the moment of the closure of one life, that God can make a new one begin. A relationship fails, and a person learns to relate better from then on; a death occurs, and the surviving spouse reaches out to others who are grieving; a job collapses and a new set of priorities and values are worked out. Anything is possible with the advent of Christ, especially when he enters the scene of our personal or world disasters. Jesus says, “Stand up straight, raise your heads, for your ransom is near at hand.

People coming to church this Sunday are in the preliminary stages of Christmas preparation. The commercials for Christmas shopping have been going on for weeks and cozy sentiments and scenes are attempting to establish the Christmas spirit.” But for churchgoers today, Advent appears to start on a downer. Just when things are really getting all decked out and pretty crib scenes are in all the shop windows, along comes Jesus, the focus of it all, talking about such horrible signs that will cause people to die of fright. What poor timing! Should we celebrate this season by putting on sack cloth and ashes? Why not save all the gloom and doom readings till February, a dreary month anyway?

Before we look on the bright and warm side of this special season, the readings call us to a sober gaze at how bad things really are. The world is old and barely seems to be able to hold itself together. Where will the next civil war break out? Which majority will try to obliterate which minority off the face of the earth? How many more will die in conflict this week in Israel? Will we ever tend to the vast masses of the needy? What about the rapidly polluted or diminished resources of our planet? You know the litany of woes by heart, and the preacher could name a few more local or most recent ones.

Psychologists say that one way we deal with stress and anxiety is through sleep. When we are on overload our bodies will just shut down and go to sleep. Jesus is

speaking to times of stress saying, when things are most stressed in the world and we would want to tune it all out, that is the very time we must be most alert. Passivity is not the solution; vigilance and actions are. In our most stressful times, God may seem absent, but Advent hope calls us to trust that even out of sight, God is at work. Jesus will enter and return to our world, and we must stay awake to his arrival.

He is not trying to dampen our Christmas Spirit, but indeed, he is trying to give real meaning to what we celebrate and anticipate. For many, it seems, the "Christmas Spirit" is a veneer of frivolity and cheer to cover up the grim realities in our personal or societal lives. Advent invites us to look at the same realities, but with eyes that expect to see something new emerge. Meanwhile, ever watchful and able to accomplish much, we set about fashioning the world he re-created for us and the one he is in the process of bringing to further completion. We stay awake; listen to his instructions on how to build a better world and do our best to make the most of the time given us until he comes.

It's hard to deal with apocalyptic language at the same time as we are readying the celebration of an infant's birth. Cosmic, heavenly portents will be followed by the nations in anguish. Then, to top it off, the Son of Man will arrive. We may not take these signs literally, but that is no reason to shrug our shoulders and skip to something else to preach. From Advent passages like today's Gospel, we get the message about the divine coming into our world and our need to expect it. The events, when they happen, may not look like a cosmic fireworks display, but they will be significant. God's reign is close at hand, and we need to tend to it. We already have to tend to much--some things significant and worthy of a lot of attention (raising a family, earning a living, etc.), and some things trivial. Nevertheless, we must not let our vision be clouded to what's truly important. To only pay attention to what's up close is to be asleep to the larger picture. Advent suggests, Things are not as they appear. Watch.

Philip Apol, a pastor in Maryland, ends an Advent sermon with these words:

When those who lived through Hitler's Blitz on London were asked what the happiest days of their lives were, a surprising majority said, the days of Hitler's Blitz on London. They felt a clear sense of purpose, remembered a stark difference between good and evil and felt their own participation on the side of right. They felt alive. They persevered and prevailed.

Maybe that's what Advent is about, a time to feel a clear sense of purpose, to persevere, prevail and feel alive.

RESPONSE: (From Marty Connell, sj to a question posed last week by Fr. Robert Konopa about Christmas liturgies for children)

I'm not in a parish right now, but I have witnessed enough children's liturgies at Christmas to know what Fr. Konopa is talking about. Sometimes I think we look beyond our tradition than to it: what about a procession to the creche? Everyone loves a parade! It seems to me that such a procession could be very inclusive of the children and worshipful at the same time. There was a time when processions distinguished the Roman Rite in many ways; adapting such to the needs of a Mass with children seems like one possible way to go.

AND OTHER RESPONSES TO THE SAME INQUIRY:

I wanted to offer my pastoral insight about 'Children's Masses.' Although I know what is meant by that term, as a pastor I try not to use Children's Mass or Youth Mass or Adult Mass. The Mass or the Liturgy of Word and Eucharist is just that. Adaptations are possible of course according to the directives of Masses with Children if that is what one chooses to do. However, pastorally, without a catholic school and with fifteen years experience I have chosen to have the Christmas Vigil Mass at 5pm. We stress that this is for parents with smaller children. As we do on Sundays, we dismiss the children for their own liturgy of the word.(Scripture/homily or talk and activity at their level. Our catechists do this under the direction of the DRE. It works very, very well. Children are dismissed from the age of 3 to 7. We have a nursery for toddlers. Children 8 and above have been Eucharist sized!) They return at the time of preparation of the gifts to remain with their parents. I find this more liturgical appropriate, more pastorally sensitive to families. Now at the end of Mass, we have used Santa Claus. I have ambivalent feelings about it, however we do it for the children. Santa Claus enters the church after the communion rite - the children ah at his presence. He is silent, walks to the place where the Christ child has been placed - kneels - says a prayer, gets up and exits quietly through the side door. Our attempt to connect Santa Claus with Christ and the Vigil Christmas Mass. I hope this might be helpful.

---- Antone Lynch

I have a simple suggestion for Fr. Konopa's children's mass: I would suggest approaching a few classrooms of kids weeks before the children's mass, and asking

them to write down what Jesus means to them (or an answer to another question along those lines). I would then collect the responses and read some of them during the homily for the children's mass.

-----Kim Kampman

While I have not done it at the Christmas Children's Mass, I have preached at the parish Mass before a Children's Christmas party by inviting some children up around me on the sanctuary steps and then sat on a step with them and did a "dialogue" with the children. Sometimes you get good answers and sometimes you get answers which might embarrass parents. But you do manage to find out something about Christmas and what children are learning and appreciating.

-----Deacon Leo T. Bistak, DMin

"We must be the change we wish to see in the world..."--Mahatma Gandhi

Two years ago, finding myself in the same dilemma as Fr Robert, I decided to write a story and integrate it into the mass for Christmas. I tried to be as faithful as I could to Raymond Brown's Adult Christ at Christmas. I did ask a friend, Cath, to write the communion reflection. I don't know how liturgical purists will react but it certainly helped add something to our Christmas celebrations. I hope it can be of help

----the Lord's blessings on your work.

Fr Bobby Kane, Airdrie, Scotland

ADVENT WREATH, 1996

Tonight, we will circle
the tall trunks of these candles
with a wheel of pine and cedar,
twine springs of Veni, Veni
into this compass with many needles
pointing us to what's been lost,
scattered to the periphery
of its open-coned center.

In weeks to come

we will light with the awestruck matches
of our tongues a Word waxing unseen
to the waning of these tapers;
a branch pushing through
the undergrowth of our waiting
that fires within us
this burning toward the green.

-----Daniel Mills in Sojourners, November-December '97

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

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