

First Sunday of Advent 2013

Introduction

Fr. Grzymski and dear friends: It is a pleasure to be with all of you today on this my first visit to St. Clement Mary Hofbauer Parish. I am very happy to greet your pastor, Father Don Grzymski - and to join you in expressing our common gratitude for his devoted priestly service to this parish day in and day out. I would also like to mention Fr. Don's service as chaplain of the Knights of Columbus for the State of Maryland and his very generous service to the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

First Sunday of Advent

For many people today, the only thing that sets this Sunday apart is that it is the heaviest travel day of the year. And we should pray for those on the road and in the air that they might reach their destinations safely after the long Thanksgiving holiday. We especially remember those killed and injured in the Amtrak derailment in the Bronx today.

But for us this Sunday is special because it's the First Sunday of Advent. It is the beginning of a new liturgical year in which we once again unite in prayer to celebrate the events in the life of Jesus by which we are saved - his coming into the world, his birth and childhood, his teaching and miracles, and most of all, his saving death and resurrection. All this will happen as we progress from Advent to Christmas, to Lent and Easter, & to that long stretch we call Ordinary Time, ending with the feast of Christ the King. But why should the advent of a new liturgical year matter to us?

A New Beginning

The beginning of a new liturgical year is important because it should signal a new beginning in our relationship with Christ and in our relationship with the Church and one another. It's not that we don't already have a relationship with Christ and the Church; but if we look into our hearts, mine and yours, we will no doubt find that these relationships need to be strengthened. That is why the Church in her wisdom each year takes us through the same cycle of liturgical celebrations: it is our common way as Catholic Christians of following the life of Christ, so that, as individuals and as a community of faith, we may share ever deeply in all the Lord

said and did to save us.

So this is a question not just of knowing more about Jesus and our faith, even though that is of great, great importance. It is really a question of waking up spiritually and opening our hearts to Him. And here is where today's Scripture readings have something crucial to say to us. They are telling us that will miss the boat on its way to the Kingdom of God if we are preoccupied with ourselves ... let me repeat ... we will miss the boat to the Kingdom of God if we are preoccupied with ourselves. So where do we find this startling message in today's readings?

Let's begin with Isaiah. He lays out for us an appealing picture of a Jerusalem that is prosperous & peaceful. All the nations will come streaming toward it. Instruments of war will be used not to kill but plant and harvest. The great desire of the human heart for a lasting peace will be established. Read in the light of Christ, this reading speaks to us of the heavenly Jerusalem. It speaks to us of the Kingdom of God, of heaven, where saints and angels are of one mind and heart in praising the Triune God because all of them are like God - poor in spirit, meek and humble, pure of heart - all of those qualities of mind and heart taught by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, qualities of mind and heart which, even in this world, make us lovers and sources of peace for those around us. Christ came into the world and gathered us together in his Church so that we might bear witness to his Kingdom in our broken world and share in it fully in the life to come.

Trouble is, we often are spiritually drowsy or preoccupied with self. In today's readings from the Letter to the Romans, St. Paul tells us that it is the hour for you and me to awake from sleep. He tells us the time is short, the moment has come to reject the works of darkness and to welcome light of truth & love into our hearts. Never one to mince words, St. Paul spells out how it is that you and I can miss the boat to God's Kingdom by self- preoccupation: he mentions drunkenness, promiscuity, lust, rivalry, and jealousy - the very things that disrupt the peace in our lives and in our world, the very things that are opposed to the Kingdom of God.

In the Gospel, Jesus also tells us that the time is short; He speaks of our tendency to be too busy for God. But in this instance he speaks not of sinful behavior but of our daily routine: eating, drinking, getting married, tilling the soil, working in the mills

... We could just as easily add doing the laundry, driving to work, trying to keep our jobs, fixing dinner, and taking our kids to soccer practice. “Stay awake!” Jesus tells us – to which we might respond – “I have to be awake to earn a living each day, to get my children to school, and to meet all of my many responsibilities.” But Jesus is tipping us off to another level of alertness we can so easily miss in the busyness of our lives.

The Upshot

So here’s the upshot, the take away. As this new Advent dawns on you and me, we need to be *spiritually* alert and *religiously* awake so that we may hear a faint voice that is calling us from within. Amid the hustle and bustle of getting ready for Christmas, amid the routine of everyday life, and even amid whatever sinful habits and addictions we have accumulated, that voice is calling us, a voice of love, and it’s saying: “Make room for me in your heart.” It is the voice of Christ.

Pope Francis just issued his beautiful exhortation, *Gaudium Evangelii* – which, literally translated means, “The Joy of the Gospel.” Following Christ and becoming Christ is not to put ourselves in a moral straightjacket. No, it’s first discovering the depth and beauty of Christ’s love for us, and when, through the grace of the Holy Spirit we discover or rediscover His love, then we have freedom to fall in love with God, all over again, more and more deeply. And once this happens, we acquire the freedom to welcome Jesus in our lives. We learn that he is not far away from us but close to us – close to us in our daily routine, close to us in our temptations and failings, closest to us when the going is the roughest. We also learn that we find him in his Word, in the Sacraments, in our family life, and also in our service to the poor and needy with whom He identified so closely. We learn that his love is stronger than our sins and that it teaches us how to live joyfully even amid our daily challenges.

So while there are many recipes for happiness during this season, I would suggest that the real way to happiness is spiritual alertness to that voice within that says, “Come, follow me!” What a moment to renew our lives of prayer, to make a good confession, to recommit ourselves to Sunday Mass, and the spiritual formation of our children, what a moment to reach out to those in need. Then, we will be ready for the coming of Christ at Christmas and at end of time. May God bless us and keep us

always in His love!