

FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT

THE GOSPEL: MARK 13: 33-37

A new Liturgical Year opens today and we embark on Year B with the evangelist Mark as our guide.

We do not begin at the beginning of Mark's Gospel, however - that will come next week. The opening Gospel of the Year is taken from near the end of the Gospel - just before Mark begins the account of Jesus' passion.

For those who see Advent as a time of preparation leading up to Christmas - this seems a very odd choice. In fact, it is a powerful reminder of what Christmas actually celebrates - the Coming of God into the world.

Advent comes from a Latin word - *advenire* - which means to come to... Advent, then, is a time to think about "advents" - comings to - and to reflect on three comings-to in particular:

The Coming of God to the world as a human baby

The Coming of God to the world in His glory at the end of time

The Coming of God into the world today.

Mark's Gospel could be described as the bluntest of the Gospels! He makes his point in straightforward language - "be on your guard" - "stay awake" - "he must not find you asleep".

This is not a Gospel offering tranquil and comfortable living. This is a Gospel that is urgent - challenging those who admire Jesus and who are impressed by what He says and does to take the extra step - into His footsteps and to follow the way of discipleship.

We do not know where our discipleship will lead - nor when Christ will return. Jesus insists that we must not allow not knowing these things to lull us into a false sense of security.

We are the doorkeepers - the ones left in charge. Our responsibility is to stay awake - even when others seem to be sleeping - so that we are ready to welcome Christ into the world when He comes.

We are also alert to the coming of God into our lives today - in the Sacrament of Christ's Body - in those in whom Christ is hidden - in the Spirit who is within us...

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR ME?

What does "staying awake" in matters of faith mean to you?

Do you look forward to the Coming of Christ?

FIRST READING: ISAIAH 63: 16-17; 64:1,3-8

The first scripture passage of the liturgical year opens on a note of impassioned pleading with God to come in all His power - all His glory - to let the world know His Presence.. a presence before which even the mountains would melt.

Isaiah is the Advent prophet - not least because he and his disciples (who, in fact, completed the book we call Isaiah) lived at a time of great longing for the coming of the Messiah and the restoration of God's People.

The people have begun to recognise that their Exile was a consequence of their failure to live with integrity and in the ways of the Lord. Their selfishness had shrivelled them up like fallen leaves - their sin like the autumn wind scattering them.

Now the longing is for a Messiah to come and gather His people and to bring them home.

The words flow with passion - and yearning. The writer faces up to the wrongs that have been committed.

But he also comes to a moment of trust and peace: God is the Father who does not forget His children - God is the potter - we are the clay, we are the work of God's hands.

The reading follows a pattern often encountered in the Psalms - and one which it is good to pray when times are hard. We are shown that God does not insist on politeness - or that we say all is well when it isn't. A real relationship with God allows us to express the pain of where we are. We tell God how it feels - and then, as the anger - pain - fear pass, we find that in the space where they were, something else has appeared - the certainty that God loves us and, no matter how it feels, God has not abandoned us to our plight - nor ever will...

SECOND READING: 1 CORINTHIANS: 13-9

Although St Paul was addressing his letter to the small community at Corinth, his words apply to us just as strongly - perhaps even more strongly that they did to those who first read them.

The Corinthians fully expected Jesus to return at any time - a belief they shared with all early Christians. Although they were already experiencing prejudice and persecution, they were strengthened by their conviction that it would not be long before Christ returned in glory and took them to their heavenly reward.

Two thousand years later we are still waiting!

In that two thousand years, the Church has had her times of strength and vigour and times when faith has had to fight against the prevailing culture. Some would say that the Church is often at her strongest and most vigorous when she is fighting against oppression and persecution. At those times, people often find that the choices are very stark - to live for God as a disciple of Jesus, the Christ - or to compromise with what is obviously wrong.

At those times, people have to fall back on the gifts that God has given to them through the Spirit - the gifts of wisdom - courage - fortitude. Often they find that the gifts are stronger than they had ever imagined they could be and, as St Paul says, allow them to be kept steady and to live without compromising their faith in God.

Perhaps a greater problem for the Church is where she lives in a culture that is apathetic or complacent. Where people see no need for faith, it is hard for the Church to evangelise. When people without faith seem to prosper, it can be hard for others to stay faithful to a God who promised to come back - but who hasn't yet.

The gifts of the Spirit are as urgently needed then - as is good teaching and preaching - so that people are held steady in their faith and learn to wait in joyful hope for the coming of their Saviour, Jesus Christ - and to remember that God is faithful and fulfils His promises - though not always as His human children predict He will!

QUESTIONS FOR THE DISCIPLE...

What is the culture in the world today?

What spiritual gifts do we need - to stay faithful ourselves - and to bring others to faith?