

First Sunday of Advent – Year B

On this first Sunday of Advent we begin a new liturgical year. The readings for this year are from Cycle B and the Gospel readings are taken from the Gospel according to Mark. The central theme of every Advent is the expectation of the coming of Christ into our lives at Christmas. It is a time when, through ritual, prayer and reflection, we focus on Christ's presence in our thinking and in the schedules of our daily routines.

Isaiah 63:16-17; 64:1, 3-8 The first reading comes from the writings of the anonymous prophet that were attached to the writings of Isaiah of Jerusalem by scribal editors in the period after the Babylonian exile. The prophecies of Isaiah, who was active in the mid-700s, are contained in chapters 1-39 of the book of Isaiah and emphasise the holiness of God. The prophet continually reminded his people that good living was required of those who were in a covenant relationship with a holy God. He was, therefore, highly critical of corruption in the ruling classes and warned of punishment on those whose pride made them ignore the honesty and justice due to the underprivileged in society.

The tone of chapters 40-66 is quite different because they were written many years after the time of Isaiah of Jerusalem. Chapters 40-55 come from the pen of the anonymous prophet, named by scholars as Second Isaiah. He lived during the Babylonian exile, around 550 BC. His message is one of hope and optimism, in contrast to the writings of Isaiah of Jerusalem. Chapters 55-66 were written after the exile by a third author, simply called Third Isaiah. This last writer was active among the people of Israel who were back in their own land and he was addressing a different set of problems from those faced by the previous authors.

Every sunrise offers us a fresh shot at seizing opportunities and making the best use of our time.

One notable point in today's reading is that God is addressed as 'father'. This is not characteristic of earlier works but starts to emerge in the spirituality of post-exilic writings. Today's extract is a prayer from the prophet appealing to God for help. The prophet and his followers acknowledge the guilt of Israel's leaders and people – guilt, which they believed brought on the punishment of the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon and the following years of exile.

The prayer now is for divine help to make a new start and build up a renewed faithfulness to God. The optimism here looks to each day as a chance to make a new beginning. Every sunrise offers us a new start, a fresh shot at seizing opportunities and making the best use of our time.

Psalms 79/80 Here is another plea for divine help. The metaphor of the vine emphasises the tender care a conscientious vintner takes to look after the vineyard he planted with his own hands. The poet acknowledges that the vineyard needs nursing back to health and to achieve this the people are eager to put themselves in God's hands. But the people need to do their part and not leave it up to their leaders. Surely there is a parallel here with our church today – rich in rhetoric but poor in the spadework necessary to reset priorities, listen to the prophets and follow Jesus out of institutional comfort zones.

If we can name our gifts, we have opened the way to developing them

1 Cor 1:3-9 In this extract Paul bears witness to one of the most productive exercises we can undertake, and that is the practice of gratitude. Authentic gratitude takes us outside ourselves and shields us from negativity as it rewires our brain to focus on the positive. We are familiar with the expression 'count your blessings' but we need to take time to actually name our gifts and all the blessings we should be grateful for. The Greek word for 'gift' is *charis*, which is often translated as grace, but its core meaning is gift – not earned or deserved, but freely given. If we identify and name our gifts, we have opened the way to developing them and using them to enrich the lives of others.

Paul mentions here the gifts of the Spirit and he spells them out in his letter to the Galatians (5:22-23). They are: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These are all social gifts that not only strengthen and enhance our relationships with others but also contribute to our personal growth to peace and wholeness.

Mark 13:33-37

Today's gospel comes from the discourse of Jesus that is sometimes referred to as the 'Little Apocalypse'. The title is not entirely accurate as the discourse does not feature the dreams and visions that are common to most apocalyptic literature. Apocalypse comes from the Greek *apokálypsis*, which means a revelation or an uncovering, so apocalyptic writing is literature that deals with future events revealed in dreams or visions. Mark 13, then, depicts Jesus speaking of the future of the Christian community and of the events leading to the end of the world. Earlier in the chapter (v.4) prior to today's passage the disciples ask Jesus when these end-time events will take place, but he admits he does not know. He says,

But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. (Mark 1:32)

Not knowing gives rise to the advice to be watchful, and Jesus illustrates this with a final parable. However, the point of the parable is not to highlight watchfulness as much as the importance of getting on with one's task or job, in other words, living so that we are always watchful. We find the same idea behind Paul's counsel to the community in Thessalonica when he urges everyone to go about their business and not just sit around idly waiting for the second coming of Jesus to happen. With sound priorities, careful attention to our spiritual growth and getting on with our tasks and responsibilities, we will be always ready.

We will all have our 'doorkeeper' moment when we must be alert and ready

In the parable it is the doorkeeper who is particularly instructed to stay awake in order to welcome the return of the master and give him entry. In the ancient Middle East where hospitality is a prized virtue it would be grossly offensive if the master should return home and find the door locked and no one to welcome him. On the other hand the master would be well pleased if he came home to find everyone had been attending to their individual jobs and were not the least bit surprised at his unexpected arrival.

Jesus is urging the disciples to keep awake. The next 'keep watch' incident occurs at Gethsemane when Jesus asks Peter, James and John to keep watch while he prays. Mark is passing on this same message to his own community, appealing to them to keep spiritually awake so as not to be caught napping when the time comes. In fact, we will all have our 'doorkeeper' moment or our Gethsemane experience when we must be alert and ready and not be found kipping.

It is not difficult to see the relevance of the readings to the Advent theme of living an upright way of life so as to be permanently ready to receive Christ into our lives and hearts. There was a time when people strongly argued that religion and politics should not be mixed, common sense would tell us that if our personal spirituality (forget about formal religion for the moment) dictates our values and priorities in life, then what goes on in the public arena most certainly affects our inner spiritual selves. Jesus was arrested and crucified for his politics, namely, formal religion that is mere lip service and not of the heart is a joke, and this is exactly what Jesus criticised. He brought his personal spiritual values to bear on every aspect of his life – most especially his politics. Each of us is a whole person and our spirituality touches on and is affected by everything that happens in the world around us.



God has no religion

Mohandas Gandhi

One can become so attached to the outward symbols and structure of religion that one forgets its original intent – to bring one closer to God

Peace Pilgrim



I said to the gym instructor, 'Can you teach me to do the splits?'

'How flexible are you?' he asked.

I said, 'I can do Tuesdays.'

Tommy Cooper

I backed a horse last week at 10 to 1. It came in at quarter past four.

Laurie Woods