

The First Sunday of Advent – November 28th, 2021

A Reflection by Fr Sylvester O’Flynn OFM Cap., Rochestown, Cork

Stay awake, praying at all times

The First Sunday of Advent marks the beginning of the liturgical year. The Gospel of the day is about the end of time (Luke 21:25-28.34). It might seem odd that Advent begins, not with preparation for the coming of Christ at Christmas, but his coming for us at the end of life’s journey. Our usual idea of time is sequential: we move forward like water in a river. But the Church’s liturgy sees time as a circle in which the line ends precisely where it started. Life is a journey from God our Creator back to God our final destiny. When this circle of life is forgotten, life is in danger of becoming a directionless succession of unconnected moments. The digital watch represents the minds of many today as it shows no past or future but only the dancing digits of the present moment. Without roots in the past or vision of the future, one lives only for the present moment. And if this collapses, as in a broken relationship or a defeat, everything falls apart.

The Advent Wreath

The Advent wreath symbolises the circle of life. It is made from evergreen leaves which withstand the winter of decay in order to express the virtue of hope which survives spiritual darkness and coldness in the winter of faith. Each week in Advent, an extra candle is lit before the white candle in the centre expresses the coming of Christ, the light of the world. Christmas is the mid-winter feast of the light which conquers all darkness.

Stay awake, praying at all times

As a preparation for the final coming of Christ, the message of today’s Gospel is “Stay awake, praying at all times.” What does this “praying at all times” mean? Saying prayers twenty-four hours? Hardly that. What is meant is an attitude of prayerfulness or attentiveness to God rather than just saying prayers. In fact, saying prayers or repeating wellknown prayers will sometimes be an obstacle to prayerfulness: if we talk too much and never listen in silence: or if saying prayers causes such a smug complacency at having the job done that we never get to the heights or depths of thirsting for God.

Thirsting for God

There is a beautiful description of thirsting for God in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, par. 2560. A woman comes to a well in Samaria where Jesus is waiting. “If you knew the gift of God. The wonder of prayer is revealed beside the well where we come seeking water: there, Christ comes to meet every human being. It is he who first seeks us and asks us for a drink. Jesus thirsts; his asking arises from the depths of God’s desire for us. Whether we realize it or not, prayer is the encounter of God’s thirst with ours. God thirsts that we may thirst for him”. Personally, I found this text opened my eyes. Prayer does not start when I am ready. No, prayer has already begun because God was waiting for me, reaching out to me, but I wasn’t attentive.

The woman at the well had a painful background of broken marriages. Jesus would be the seventh man in her life and seven is always a divine number in John’s Gospel. What Jesus wanted from that woman was her empty bucket. He is waiting for us to bring our minds

empty of trivialities and our hearts thirsting for God. Call it attentiveness to God's presence. Those who master this sensitivity are saints. In the words of T.S. Eliot:

"But to apprehend

the point of intersection of the timeless
with time, is an occupation for the saint."

But for the rest of us there is only the "unattended moment, the moment in and out of time."

Tuning in to Radio God

Think of God as great radio station broadcasting to us on many wavelengths. Wherever you are, as you read these words, the air is carrying the broadcast of dozens of radio stations, but the sounds, mercifully, are on a frequency too high for the human ear, unaided, to hear. But switch on a receiver, turn the tuning dial, and you will pick up a plethora of sounds. Radio God broadcasts daily on many wavelengths; through our reflection on life, scripture, nature, inspirational people, sharing the cross, our favourite symbols and so on. Obviously, if we are tuned into every and any other station except Radio God, then prayer will not happen for us. The very least we can do is to create space in our minds and time for God. And then learn the wavelength where we can best listen to God. It will be wellnigh impossible if we allow the sensitivity of the soul to be "coarsened with debauchery, drunkenness and the cares of life", as today's Gospel puts it. These sensual gratifications only draw a veil over the huge abyss in the heart which can be filled by God alone. The experience of Saint Augustine taught him that the heart is made for God and will know no rest until it rests in God.

Christmas has been commercialized

In preparation for Christmas, the colourful street-lights cheer us up during the dark days of winter in the northern hemisphere. Yet it is a pity that the commercial side of Christmas has devoured the great lessons of Advent. It prepares us for the threefold coming of Christ: his coming in past history at the Nativity; his future coming at the end of life; and his everyday coming to us as he sits by the well, thirsting for our approach in prayer as we bring our empty bucket.

Advent Prayer

You are the God who has come to us in the past: who will come again at the end of life: and who comes to the well waiting for our attentiveness every day.

We ask for the light of faith to penetrate all forms of darkness in these difficult times. Come, Lord Jesus, come.

We ask for the virtue of hope to help us keep going when all seems cold and dark. Come, Lord Jesus, come.

Warm the fervour of our love, enabling us to cope with all feelings of hurt or rejection. Come, Lord Jesus, come.