

Homily for the First Sunday of Advent



Do you remember the first lockdown back in March. We were just getting used to the Covid 19 experience then, and just realising the many downsides; especially not being able to go and see elderly relatives, problems with employment and shopping and schooling, eating out and going to the pub, getting to the doctors. But at the same time, after a while, we began to see some of the benefits. Cleaner air, better views, quieter roads, but also much greater attention to each other, to the needs of neighbours who perhaps we had not really met. People doing shopping for each other. People really appreciating the work done by some of the caring services, some of whom were rarely thought of, even criticised, in the past. The clapping for the NHS for example.

And at the time we said, we really have to hang on to some of these things. If only we could be a bit like this when we get back to ordinary life. The 'old' normal, you might say.

But I am not sure that we have. I think we have forgotten that commitment. I think two things have changed. One is that we are tired of it. The pressure is getting to us, the worry about work and the like.

But at the same time we see an end in sight. Or we hope so. And once we see that, then we tend to think, "Soon I can get back to life as it was, to booking my summer holidays, to going out as I used to. And if we are not careful the old 'I' overtakes all those things that can make us 'we'.

In a way, the gospel today is about this. It is about how we live our daily lives. How we live in the present.

At first the early Church were convinced that the world was going to end immediately. Not in a dark way like today's dystopian films like 'The Road,' but in a dramatic yet joyful appearance when

Jesus would come on glorious clouds and lift the chosen to heaven, and soon. Or as the first reading said, “Tear open the heavens and come down.” You only had to live till then.

But they soon realised, as St. Paul did too, that it was not going to be so soon. And here in our gospel, Mark makes the same point. “You do not know when the Master is coming...”

For communities in persecution that was especially tough. Mark’s Roman Christian community were already being persecuted. How could they keep on living like this? Suffering in this way? if Jesus was not going to come soon.

‘Stay awake’, ‘Be alert,’ (shades of Covid life there), they could easily understand. But ‘You do not know the hour,’ that was painful.

And yet this is exactly what Mark is trying to tell them. Even under persecution, suffering, it is not looking to the end that is important, not looking for an escape route, it is how you live your life when faced with whatever life is going to throw at you.

It then becomes important to understand how Jesus’ life can be an example to us. True Christ-like life is actually more clearly revealed when it is being tested.

Advent is obviously the time of year we look towards Christmas. And we share with so many others, believers or not, the joy in being able to bring at least some of the family together if we can, even this year, and by whatever means we may have, it might even be Skype or Zoom.

But for those who believe, this short four week preparation, (or three month if you count the shops putting up their decorations) is actually a stage in preparing us for much more than a Christmas holiday.

Advent gives us readings about our preparation for that **Second** Coming, whatever form it may take. And the Church gives us this time of year to reflect on ‘How I do live?’ ‘In the light of my belief that Jesus could come any time, How does that affect what I do?’ Because I do not think we really believe that, do we? We tend to live

gambling that we have plenty of time. In the Middle Ages they sometimes put off being baptised, which they thought was a sure ticket to heaven, until the end of their lives so that they could do what they wanted. But, especially in those days, it was a dangerous gamble.

The core of St. Paul's thoughts on praying continuously, is to have our thoughts fixed on God for as much of the day that we can. Just taking pleasure in the knowledge that he is always near us.

If, in this Advent, we can try to train ourselves to do this more, we will have been successful.

Why say 'train ourselves'? It sounds a bit severe, even forced. Because from the earliest days of the OT, people knew that discipline was at the heart of a good life of faith. To make sure we give time to God we have to almost put it in our diaries, or days go by and we realise God has slipped by too.

And it is then, when we make time for God, that we let him reveal his love for us. Sharing the gifts of the Spirit with us and helping us to see that he is indeed the potter and we are the clay, and that we are always in his hands and he is still, every moment of our lives, lovingly moulding us into the vision he has for us.