

'The coming of our God, our thoughts must now employ.'

These words readily come to mind as I ponder reflections to share with you, my brothers, at the beginning of Advent.

Yet my first reflection is to acknowledge that my thoughts are so easily and often employed elsewhere! You will know what I mean.

For me, there is still a deep uncertainty in the air. One focus is the ongoing presence of the Covid-19 virus in its differing forms. Those who have had to live through periods of personal isolation speak of its debilitating consequences. Indeed, I have recently tested positive and, although fully vaccinated and feeling well, I am observing all the requirements. At this time, then, our ability to keep to Church routines is not as clear cut as we had hoped. The virus has its own timetable, and is no respecter of our established patterns.

A glance at almost any newspaper highlights how often accepted customs and patterns are questioned or shaken. In so many different spheres, present tragedies and deep-seated injuries are graphically portrayed and spoken of openly. The failures of the past are brought to the light of day, and rightly so. This is a cathartic time for so many. There is pain on every page of our daily papers. Yet, in the glare of publicity, it is not at all easy to gather the fruit of such catharsis. The desire for better ways forward is strong, longed for by so many, especially among young people: for new pathways of justice and dignity for all, for a radically different way of caring for the created order, for international solidarity in the response to the massive movement of vulnerable people.

Yet, in all of this, our thoughts should be centred on the coming of our God.

The life-giving Father, the Word made flesh, the Holy Spirit of power, comes at every moment, into every situation, into every shadow of sorrow as well as every brightness of joy. If we permit it, the daily coming of our God can redirect our weary hearts, sustaining us in the routines that can feel so burdensome at times, and steer us away from false habits and pathways which promise a little but actually deliver dross, initially, and, later on, personal chaos.

This coming of our God our thoughts must employ, day by day. With so many activities on our hands and so many other demands, we can easily miss this coming, this presence, of our healing Lord. He doesn't impose or thrust himself into our consciousness. Yet he is there, calming us, straightening us out. We need time and space for this to happen. So let's look again at our routines and see if we can be firmer in making the time and space for his coming to find our hearts. To do so bears good fruit.

One aspect of this fruit is the lengthening of our horizons. The Second coming of our Saviour, proclaimed in Advent, expresses so powerfully not only our direction of travel but also our destination. That is the horizon against which we measure our hopes and fears, our daily efforts. This, too, is revitalising for us.

I have just finished reading John le Carré's last work, published after his death. One of the main characters, approaching her death, says this: 'Christianity for me is not so much about religion as about values we hold dear. And the sacrifices we make to preserve them.'

Yes, the values are important. But they flow from a revealed source. They will not flourish without that 'living water' who has a name, a history and an ending towards which he flows, carrying us with him, even if it be night!

Advent is our time of joy for naming him again, at every opportunity. We live by him, not just by, or for, these values. His coming into our history, in that unique time and place, is so crucial. Let us speak of it in words and show it in actions. It is spelt out for us in the Gospel texts, in the words of carols and depicted in so many cards. This was the time of his Visitation. Let us speak of it clearly as best we can, avoiding the fate of Jerusalem which was blind to the moment of its visitation, causing Jesus to shed such tears of sorrow (Lk. 19.44).

We proclaim this coming amid a cacophony of noise. It is not easy to do so. Yet the words of the Office of Readings from last Thursday (25th November) caught my eye. They point out the way we are to go, insisting that the 'narrowest of tracks' by which we are to proclaim him and which we struggle to find, have been transformed 'into a royal road'. Then this:

'Two feet are needed to run along his highway; they are humility and charity. Everyone wants to get to the top - well, the first step to take is humility. Why take strides that are too big for you - do you want to fall instead of going up. Begin with the first step, humility, and you will be already climbing' (St Caesarius of Arles: How can Christ be followed?).

May our proclamation of Christ be marked by such humility, and of course by kindness. In thanking you for all you do I seek no grand words but a simple and sincere gratitude for your life and ministry in the service of our noble Lord. At the crib I will marvel again at the extraordinary sway held in our lives by this 'great little one' and the generosity he calls forth. Please thank your kind parishioners for their generosity in the crib offerings, used for the poorest in our midst through the Catholic Children's Society. Maybe, too, you could find a way of also asking their support for the people of the Holy Land in these times of their great need. The charity 'Friends of the Holy Land' are asking for our support for their work there. It is a cause close to my heart. Perhaps you can pass on that appeal in a manner and time you think fit, such as on a Sunday soon after Christmas.

So these are simply my reflections. I pray that these weeks of Advent may be a time of nourishment for you, in these darkened evenings and often difficult days. May that glorious light, which penetrates every darkness, warm and strengthen you into a truly happy and holy Christmas.

And do remember me in your prayers, please.

+Vincent