

Homily for the 1st Sunday of Advent 2023 Year A

Today is the 1st Sunday of Advent. Like Lent, it is a solemn period in the Church's year, when by prayer and fasting we prepare ourselves to celebrate the coming of, or the advent of Christ, to us in the great feast of Christmas.

From today the priests' vestments change to purple, a sign of mourning, sorrow, and repentance.

Listen carefully to all the prayers and readings for they reflect and relive the hopes and the expectations of the Prophets of the coming of God to Man, that is the Advent of the Messiah.

The mood of those readings moves between threat, warning, hope and consolation, for when God does come to Man it is a time not only of Joy, but also of Judgement.

Now the life of the Church, the seasons of the Church, and our faith, are not just mere nostalgia for a past event, but they are also a preparation for a future event, the coming of Christ, and our own personal meeting with Christ. Past and Future, two mysteries wrapped up in one event, reflecting man's deepest need and longing for more than just what the present moment gives. In other words, an eternal thirst for God Himself.

The whole of our lives is therefore a form of Advent for its culmination with our personal meeting with Christ, a moment of Judgement as well as of Joy.

Now in realistic terms we don't live this life with everything focussed upon the future: now, this present moment is important as well, and our faith has to give value and significance to this today, to this situation, because just as life can be seen as an Advent, so too each day is a form of Advent; God comes to Man, is with Man in the events of each day.

And it is the part of the painful business of growing and maturing in one's faith to be able to see the hand of God, the subtle presence of God to us in the ordinary events of our lives.

God is not only the creator or sustainer of human life, but by actually becoming Man, by taking flesh, He sanctified, and made Holy, man's ordinary way of existing.

Because of that historical event in a stable in Bethlehem 2000 years ago, the coming of Christ as Man, we can no longer look at reality in simply terms of God being up there, or out there, and life as we live it on a totally separate plane.

No, because God became man, He is with Man, comes to man, meets man in the moments and circumstances of each day.

Let us now open up the eyes of our faith in the next few minutes, wipe away the sleepiness imposed by the routine of living and try and see how God comes to each of us, each day.

He may come to us under the guise of Challenge. It may be in the want or need of our fellow men, in their physical, material, or spiritual poverty. It is responding to that need to the best of our ability and resources that we meet Christ.

Maybe we cannot always rise to those challenges because our finances and energies are limited. But if we close our minds to a challenge then we close our hearts to the presence of God to us in that challenge.

He comes to us also in ordinariness, the routine obligations, the duties, and the boredom of our particular state of life. It is in the faith of fullness and perseverance in these that we meet Christ.

All of us know of wonderful examples of ordinary people around us, who in very difficult circumstances struggle to remain faithful to vows, promises, duties and standards that were first undertaken in moments of love, joy and enthusiasm. The passage of time sometimes dulls the importance of those promises. Those lives of faithfulness, though unspectacular are miracles of sanctity and holiness, and are remembered and treasured by God.

He comes to us also in sorrow, failure, disappointment, heartbreak, illness, or the death of those we love. In bearing each of these crosses we meet Christ.

Nobody can be totally protected from this, the dark and shadow side of life, but if we can discern the presence of God with us in those painful moments, then we can transform them from the negative things that they are, and turn them around, make spiritual use, and gain from them.

They are little deaths that are always followed by Resurrection.

Importantly, God comes to us in Joy, those wonderful moments of happiness, pleasure and fulfilment, the experience and the sharing of love in the actual enjoyment of all these things we meet Christ.

Religious faith and life have often been erroneously presented as a grave and joyless relationship with God. But the human heart, and the human spirit have a God given appetite and capacity for Joy. It is a limitless capacity that only God himself can fill and satisfy.

It is a sad thing, but some religious people genuinely feel hesitation and even guilt about the experience of Joy. God allows us and wants us to experience legitimate Joys, not only to ease the burdens of this life, but also as a foretaste of the Eternal Joy that is to come.

It is alright to enjoy life and be Joyful, for it is in the experience of Joy that we meet God as He most truly is in Himself.

Finally, God comes to us sometimes most mysteriously in silence and in absence, moments when we can no longer feel or sense the presence of God, when we doubt whether He really does exist.

Just to know how to remain still and faithful in those awful moments is to meet Christ.

Some of the great Saints who were masters of prayer and the interior life teach us the painful truth that God is always much closer to us in that profound sense of His absence, than He is when we are basking in the consolations and delights of a sense of His presence.

Now each one of our lives, and each one of our days has its moments of challenge, ordinariness, sorrow, Joy, and emptiness, and each in its own way is therefore an Advent, a way of God coming to us, and a way that each of us can come to God.

By our meeting life and living it to the full, by rising to its challenges, bearing with its ordinariness, enduring its moments of emptiness and sorrow, and revelling in its Joys we open ourselves to God and meet God.

Just a few thoughts to make the Season of Advent come alive.