

Fr Tom's homily for the First Sunday of Advent

First Reading: Isaiah 63:16-17,64:1,3-8
Second Reading: First Letter to the Corinthians 1:3-9
Gospel: Mark 13:33-37



On Friday afternoon, I met a friend so I could get some greenery from his hedge for our Advent Wreath and as we were cutting the greenery he said “It’s strange to think that in a month Christmas will be all over” to which I replied “No, it will have only just begun”. Then Fr James pointed out today that the billboard outside St Gabriel’s has a similar mentality – in a big caption it says “Tis the season to be streaming” alongside images of three different ‘Christmas’ movies. But actually it’s really ‘Tis the season to be preparing’. Someone said to me “In Advent, Jesus isn’t singing Jingle Bells, he’s ringing alarm bells”.

So today, we begin advent. At time of waiting and watching and preparing. But waiting isn’t very popular, especially in today’s world. We have email and social media where if we haven’t had a response from someone within half an hour we think something is wrong. With streaming services, we often don’t have to wait for the next episode of a programme, we can binge watch a whole series if we want to.

But this year there is something different. We’re not into the whirlwind of Christmas parties as we begin advent, for many there is an imposed wait in these dark days. We’re waiting for a vaccine, or to be able to meet up with family and friends, or even just for this whole pandemic to be over. For many, it is a time of sadness, or emptiness or even hopelessness.

But for us as Christians, we can plug in to the liturgical year and be refreshed and renewed. Pope Benedict gave some thoughts about Advent which were around five words. They were – presence, waiting, preparation, sign and changing. That order can teach us so much about the season of Advent. It got me thinking.

Presence.

To be present, we must be aware of our surroundings. How often do we drift through life not really noticing what is happening? But that is what Jesus is warning us against in today’s Gospel when he tells us to “Stay Awake”.

Waiting

We are to spend time waiting for the coming of our saviour – it’s not just about getting through those four weeks before Christmas, but having an expectation of the Lord’s coming. Our Advent prayer is “Maranatha – Come Lord Jesus” our whole prayer life should be blossoming from that sense of waiting.

Preparation

Pope Benedict says that Christmas is a time to meditate on the meaning and value of our existence. But it makes us realise how injured our life is by sin. In preparing to

receive the loving and merciful gift of the incarnation at Christmas, we should look to our failures and sins and ask for the Lord's healing – especially through the sacraments.

Sign

The sign of the Lord's Incarnation shows us the humility of God and that should lead us to faith and love and therefore to give us hope.

Changing

A true experience of Advent should change us. We should want to be changed because of the intimacy that the Lord offers us and how our expectant waiting should be prayer that focuses us on the values of the Lord.

When we look back over this year, we see that things have been very different. We have been unable to attend Mass and other church events as normal. But that has also lead us to forget. Even though Public Masses will soon resume, Mass is not like before. There is no singing and we can't sit at our favourite pews.

Yes, so many things have changed and things keep changing, so much so that we are forgetting what it was like before. Yes, we are slowly forgetting our spiritual habits and routines. We are also slowly forgetting the names of our fellow parishioners because we have not met them for some time already. Yes, we are forgetting and forgetting, and then with nothing much to remember, we are slowly getting sleepy and then we start sleeping and sleeping.

But we need to be awake – those five guides that Pope Benedict gives us, helps us be awake. In being awake we will be renewed and changed. So are we willing to remember Advent this year? To prepare us spiritually, to change ourselves to be in line with the Lord's will?

We need to wait not in a negative way, but in a positive way. Pope Francis has said *“We Christians are called to safeguard and spread the joy of waiting: we await God who loves us infinitely and at the same time we are awaited by Him. In this way, life becomes a great betrothal,”*

So let us be present to this season, hear the alarm bells that Jesus is ringing, and be changed for the better.

Fr James and Fr Tom wish you a blessed Sunday. Keep safe and well, and never hesitate to pick up the telephone and be in touch. See you in church I hope! Keep in close contact with the website for news of how practical plans are developing.