

Dear Friends,

When we look back at major events like wars and revolutions we might wonder what it was like to live through that time that has shaped and changed the course of human history. There are accounts and stories that give a sense of the "feel" of the time, but to be there really living it is clearly a different matter.

One of the books I read this year is by Daniel Defoe, the author of *Robinson Crusoe*. It is his *Journal of the Plague Year*, which gives a vivid picture of life during the Great Plague of London of 1665, that shows many resemblances to our current state. How will the Coronavirus pandemic appear to future historians? What will its long-term effects be? We can already see that there will be severe consequences for the economy for some time to come and maybe people will not be able to travel so much in the future, but how our attitudes to the way we live may change is yet to be seen. It could be a watershed in our history, but how that will be we do not yet know.

Meanwhile we will have to continue living with the pandemic and the restrictions it places on us for some while, though at least from next Sunday we can resume public worship and come together for the Mass again. It seems very appropriate that we are now beginning a new round of the Church's life with the season of Advent, which in a way is all about time, its meaning and how we react to it.

As believing Christians we are living in two dimensions simultaneously. God is always present and available to us, but in different ways which affect the manner of our life. We are living in the here and now, the world of 2020, of Coronavirus and all that goes with it, and it is in this world that we have to work out how we seek to be faithful to God and follow his ways. But we are also constantly looking forward beyond the here and now to the world to come, since we believe that our ultimate destiny lies beyond this world and its limitations and restrictions. 'Now we see through a glass darkly, then we shall see face to face.'

There is an early Christian text known as the letter of Diognetus which says that Christians live in the world in the same ways as everyone else - they wear the same kind of clothes and eat the same food, they have to obey the same laws, but although their days are passed on the earth 'their citizenship is above in the heavens,' and this affects the way they live their life now and the witness they make thereby to what they believe. The writer suggests that they are able to

withstand difficulties, misunderstanding, even persecution because they have their gaze fixed on heaven. We do indeed have many examples through the centuries of martyrs who have gone to their death willingly, gladly, because they see their death both as a way of bearing witness to what they believe and as the gateway to life with God.

Some religions and systems of thought suggest that nothing that happens in this world is of any real significance: it is all unreal, an illusion. Reality lies elsewhere, in the realm of the spirit. We can never say that as Christians because we believe that God created the world and became incarnate as a human person in order to restore it to himself where it has gone astray. What happens in it, therefore, matters very much, but more, as we say, as a preparation for what is to come, and that is what will ultimately matter most to us when our life here is ended.

Advent traditionally puts our destiny before us in the form of the Four Last Things - death, judgment, heaven and hell. If we fear what may happen to us in the afterlife, we always need to remember that God as our judge is above all a *merciful* judge, who desires not the death of the sinner but that we should turn back to him and live. This is what Jesus tells us, in for example what I think is one of the most important messages in our Scriptures:

*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,  
so that everyone who believes in him may not perish,  
but have eternal life.  
Indeed God did not send the Son into the world  
to condemn the world,  
but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

Here is the Advent Hope, hope being the virtue above all that we can practice in this season. We live in the world as it is seeking as best we can to be aware of God and allow him to be the centre of our lives, but we do so in the hope that however much we and the world go astray God is always drawing us back to him and onwards into the perfection of our life in him. This should put our present existence into some kind of perspective and help us not to be so caught up in it that we lose sight of what matters most. In order to do so we need to be alert and wakeful to the presence of God wherever it may be found. 'Stay awake' Jesus says three times in the short Gospel reading for this Sunday, and the way to stay awake is to continue our life of prayer and service to each other, while being on the look-out for signs of God maybe where we least expect to find him. As a book title has it, he is a *God of Surprises*.

Living in the parish of Ealing Abbey, where the monks follow the Rule of St. Benedict, I sometimes think of his principle that everyone who visits the monastery should be treated as if it is Christ himself. That is a good precept to keep in mind, that Christ, the life of God, is present in every human person - unlikely though that may sometimes seem to us. We need not have our sights so fixed on the world to come that we ignore and neglect the possibilities of knowing God where we are now. And this is the paradox and mystery of Advent, which is also the mystery of our whole human life - that the God whose future coming we await with hope and expectation is the God who has already made himself present and real to us in the time, the place where we find ourselves now.

Wishing you every blessing, Fr. Robin

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