

Homily: First Sunday of Advent 2020

So it's Advent, a season of expectation and waiting, a season of Christian hope. It's really an exciting season, if we think about it – and maybe we should try to rediscover something of the excitement of the Lord's coming to us. Children, as we know, start to get very excited at this time of year; as the decorations begin to go up, Christmas lights begin to appear, they sense the approach of the festive season and all it brings.

In the church, of course, there are no Christmas decorations yet. In fact, the atmosphere is, if anything, more subdued than normal. The flowers have gone; the green of Ordinary Time and the white of feast days has been replaced by the purple of this season. The only addition is the Advent wreath – a simple wreath of greenery, accompanied by the four Advent candles, showing us the dawning light of this season. And the Gospel is hardly festive. No talk yet of angels, mangers and shepherds; instead, there is the simple call: Stay awake. On Christmas Eve, many children will no doubt do their best to stay awake longer than their parents would really like, trying to see if they can catch a glimpse of Santa doing his rounds. As the song goes, "every mother's child is going to spy, to see if reindeer really know how to fly". But, as we know, no child ever gets to see Father Christmas himself, because everyone falls asleep before he comes. They receive the benefit of his generosity, but do not see Santa himself.

Perhaps that's why the Lord Jesus tells us to stay awake. We, all of us, constantly benefit from His generosity – He continually offers us His grace, His gifts to help us live. He continually sustains us in our lives; He never fails to lead us forward. So we receive from His hand, yet so often we miss His visitation to us, because we are, spiritually, asleep. Being asleep in this way means failing to notice the presence of the Lord Jesus in our day to day lives; it means forgetting Him and neglecting to be guided by Him. Then we are asleep, guided more by our flawed instincts than by His light. "Stay awake", He tells us: "Notice that I am here. I am with you."

I've just finished reading a book called *The Way of the Pilgrim*. It's a classic of Orthodox spirituality, though I must admit that I only came across it quite recently. It was mentioned in something I read, and then, the very next day, I came across a copy of it in a pile of books someone had given me. So I took it as a sign that the Lord wanted me to read it. The book is a lovely account of a pilgrim's journey through Russia. As he makes his pilgrimage, he meets many characters, some friendly and some less so. He shares his story and his knowledge of God with those who are willing to listen. Throughout the book, his quest is always the same: he wants to understand, and live, the command to pray constantly. "What does it mean?" he asks; "how can it really be lived?" Initially he relies on a wise old monk as a spiritual guide. The monk tells him to say the prayer "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me", over and over again – 3000 times per day, in fact! (Not a priest I would willingly go to confession too – imagine the penance!) At first, the pilgrim finds it hard, but quite quickly he gets used to it, and goes back to report this to his spiritual guide. "Now, 6000 times per day", the monk tells him. And when this is achieved, it goes up to 12,000 times every day. In the end, he says the prayer constantly, whatever he is doing, outwardly at first, then

inwardly, in his heart, so that if he ever stops, he feels that something is missing. And he understands that he's received a gift: now that his prayer never ceases, he becomes aware that Jesus is always with him. His prayer is constant, so he is always aware of the Lord's closeness.

I'm not going to suggest that you try to say this simple and beautiful prayer 12,000 times per day – though it is a prayer worth remembering and worth repeating often: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.” But Advent is the time of year most especially when we are called to be aware that Jesus is always with us. Even before you get up in the morning, the Lord is already present and watching over you, as He has been all night. He is with you as you go about your work and rest. He's in the empty seat next to you as you drive to the shops; He's sat across from you at the dinner table; He's in the two metre gap you leave between you and the next person. He's always with us. “Stay awake,” Jesus teaches: “Notice that I am with you.” He is with us because He loves us; He is with us because He is interested in every aspect of our lives, however mundane, routine or boring it is to us.

Jesus teaches us today to be ready for His return at the end of time, and preparing for the Second Coming is the focus of this first part of Advent. But we can best do this by noticing the many ways in which the Lord comes to us now. The more we are aware of His presence, the more we will grow close to Him; the closer we grow to Him, the better prepared we are to see Him face to face. In prayer, in His Word, in the sacraments, in the community of the Church, in His constant companionship: Jesus is with us. He is always with us.

In today's second reading, St Paul tells us that we are “waiting for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed”. To “be revealed”, rather than “to return”, Paul says, because in a very real sense the Lord has never left us. It's true that He will come to earth anew at the end of time, in great power and glory, and will once again be visible to us and to the world. But really He's already here, with us, alongside us, gently accompanying us every day. At the end of time, or indeed at the end of our lives, Jesus will be revealed to us. When He is revealed, it will no doubt come as a shock to some people; but not to us, at least not if we stay awake. If we don't sleep walk through life, but instead open our eyes constantly to the closeness of Jesus, His return will be like a reunion with an old friend: a moment of delight, of joy, of longing fulfilled. And so Advent is not just waiting; it's also preparing, watching, keeping alert, in joyful hope, looking ahead to that day when our friend and our Saviour reveals Himself to us in glory.

Fr Andrew

