

1st Sunday of Advent

Dec. 3, 2017

By Fr. Thomas Joseph

This Sunday is both the first Sunday of Advent and the beginning of the liturgical year, year B. Advent is a season of hope and a period during which Christians await the fulfillment of the promise of God through his prophets. In addition to being a season of hope, it is equally, a season of great patience and prayer.

God's Word invites us to reassess where our ways may be leading us. In his letter *"The Joy of the Gospel"* Pope Francis encouraged us to remember what we have to be joyful about, as friends of Jesus Christ. Advent would be a good time to take this message to heart and maybe even make a new beginning in our Catholic faith in action. Now is the time to open our hearts and invite the Lord to come more fully into our lives and lead us on.

We begin Advent with a hopeful need for his coming. Our first reading puts this need into words, "We have all withered like leaves and our sins blew us away like the wind." Prophet Isaiah proposes whirling leaves as symbols of all that is dried up and withered in our lives. But he also calls us to look for a better day. God is still in charge of creation, and our personal lives are under his loving care. We pray with fervour this Advent, using the words of the psalmist "Come, Lord Jesus" "Visit this vine and protect it, the vine your right hand has chosen."

It's interesting to watch the behaviour of people at airports, waiting for loved ones to arrive from a flight. They seem excited, eager for the first appearance of the familiar face, ready with the broad smile of greeting. We too wait for the Lord's

coming with anxious eagerness, because we long for his presence... In the gospel Jesus says, "Be on guard, stay awake". He wants us to have a clear purpose in life, to mature in our relationship with him and with others, to give time to prayer, and to live with his message in our hearts. That's what our Advent should be like. And while we wait, we can enjoy his promised gifts. St. Paul guarantees us: "You will not be without any of the gifts of the Spirit while you are waiting for our Lord Jesus Christ."

Some of you may have had an experience of waiting at the critical care waiting room. This is the room where family and friends wait while the doctors care for their loved ones who have suffered a devastating stroke, a serious heart attack, a horrible car accident or some other catastrophic event. It is a place very different from any other place in the world. The people who wait there are bound together like no other people in the world.

Family members and friends can't do enough for each other in that room. No one is proud. No one stands on ceremony or protocol. Petty disputes and hurts are nowhere to be found. Perhaps there are several patients whose family and friends are waiting in that room. These complete strangers feel bound in their shared hope for their loved ones. Class and race melt away. Each person in that room is a parent or spouse or child or close friend of the suffering. He or she is a white, black or Asian, a blue collar or white-collar worker. Everyone in the waiting room pulls for each other. If one family receives good news, there is hope and joy for all. If another family hears sad news, everyone in the room feels their grief. In the critical care waiting room, the world changes. The entire universe is focused on the doctor's next report. All eyes continually glance at the door. The critical

care waiting room is a place of hope and a place of expectation. It is a place of Advent.

The world we live is a waiting room. We keep an eye out for the doctor, the Divine Healer, to come. We hope to experience his good news. We long for him to say, “the patient, your loved one, is fine. He or she is going to recover, is going to live.”

And so, we watch. We watch for the Divine Healer to come and lead us into His Love. We watch for the times, more than we could imagine, when God extends His Love to us. We watch for the times when we can serve His Love by serving others. We watch for the opportunities to unite ourselves closer to His Love through prayer and sacrifice. We wait. We watch. We watch for opportunities to grow. Advent, the time of watching, reminds us that our entire lives must be spent watching for ways that we can grow more spiritual, grow closer to Christ.

We sit in the critical care waiting room of life longing to live with the Loved One. We need the Lord. We need Him in our lives to make sense of life. Without Him, our lives are chaos. Without the Lord, our lives are a mad dashing about from place to place, person to person, doing for the sake of doing, wandering aimlessly only because everyone else is wandering aimlessly. But with the Lord, sin, chaos, is conquered. With the Lord, everything falls into place. Even the most difficult experiences of our lives, even suffering and death have meaning when we see it in the light of Jesus’ death and resurrection.

We long for our Lord’s Presence. If we deny this need, this necessity for God to be in our lives, then we chance becoming useless shells, Christians on the outside, but not much on the inside. But if we fight off our inclination to embrace chaos, if we fight off being overwhelmed by the superficial face of the world and

allow our need for Christ to transform our lives, then we can be what he created us to be, images of His Love on earth. We can be whole. We can be Christians.

The gospel today, the householder, before he sets off on his journey, gives his gatekeeper a special warning. "Be on your guard then, because you do not know when the master of the house is coming." If we were to focus our gaze on the doorkeeper alone, we would realize that perhaps the greatest danger facing him is not so much that he may fall asleep on the job but that he becomes complacent and his gate keeping becomes only a job and nothing more. We know that gate-keeping can become only boring and that routine can set in and we lose focus of what is important.

This applies to the Sacred as well, we can get used to God, and then smugness and skepticism creeps into our lives. If we allow ourselves to become Christians of habit and routine, displaying external ritual without the depth of spiritual awareness, we no longer encounter God. All we have is our own emptiness.

We know Jesus is constantly coming into our lives. Each of us is the doorkeeper, whom God has put in charge of our own lives as well as the lives of our community, our church, our society. Advent calls us to stand ready. We can only welcome Jesus into our life if we are alert and attentive to Him. "The spiritual life is", according to Thomas Merton "first of all, a matter of being awake".